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MASSIVE REVIEW SPECIAL

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AUGMENTED EXCLUSIVE

DEUS EX MANKIND DIVIDED

We find out why Adam Jensen was almost killed off

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UNCHARTED 4

A THIEF'S END

WHY NAUGHTY DOG'S LATEST COULD ALREADY BE THE **GAME OF THE YEAR**

INSIDER ACCESS

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Behind the scenes at one of the UK's biggest eSports events

HIGHLIGHTS

BATTLEBORN ■ DETROIT ■ RATCHET & CLANK ■ MINECRAFT: STORY MODE ■ NBA LIVE 16
TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS ■ LIFE IS STRANGE ■ GANG BEASTS ■ RAGING JUSTICE
ANNO 2205 ■ TALES OF ZESTIRIA ■ DISGAEA 5 ■ WWE 2K16 ■ LEAGUE OF LEGENDS



ALBION UNVEILED



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Have you ever taken a step back and surveyed just how much gaming has had an impact on your life? And I don't mean the number of hours it's eaten up in your lifetime, the family gatherings you've been late for because you were searching for a checkpoint, or the evenings you made excuses about being able to go out, when in reality you were busy collecting resources for a sword you really wanted to forge.

No, what I mean is the degree to which a life of gaming has influenced how you perceive and make sense of the world. I had reason to begin to ponder this recently for a couple of reasons. First, since the beginning of the year I've been wearing a fitness tracking wristband. It seemed like an interesting way of tracking my health and it didn't take long for me to become obsessed with entering in the details of what I was eating and doing each day. I was rewarded with a daily score and I then became interested in how I could score more. I looked for foods that would bump up my averages, I would take circuitous routes into work so I walked a little further, all in the name of a better score.

The second recent incident was in solving a problem with a friend where I realised we were applying a kind of gamer logic to the issues. We gathered resources. We sorted out elements that seemed appropriate to maintaining our vitality and health (water, food, etc.). We even segmented the problem at hand into small milestones to make the whole task seem less daunting. We essentially gamified the situation, much as the wristband has done with my general health.

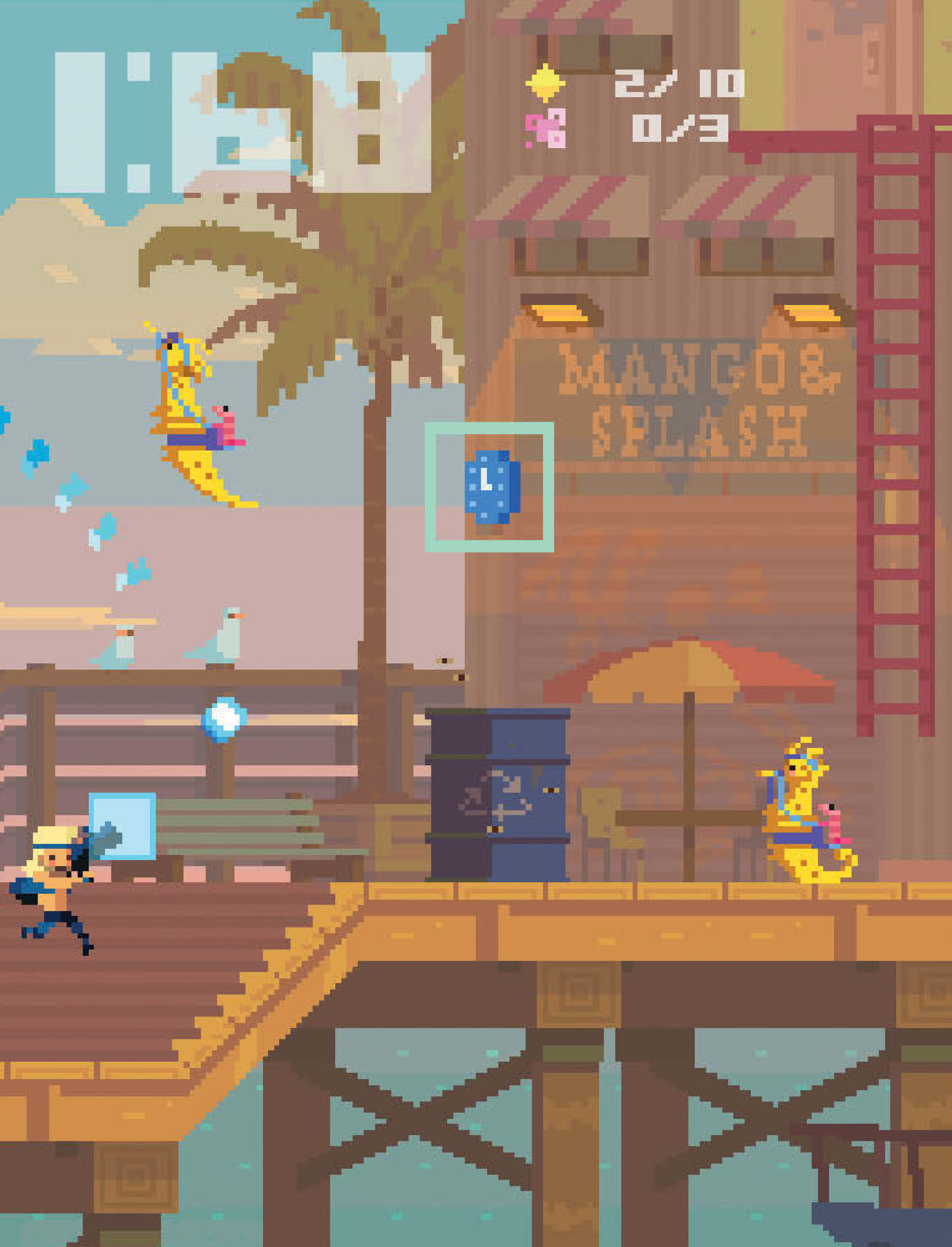
The more studies that are done into the impact of gaming on brain development, the more it begins to emerge that this kind of thing does affect us, but perhaps more positively that some believe. Applying a little score-chasing to my thinking appears to be having a positive affect.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR



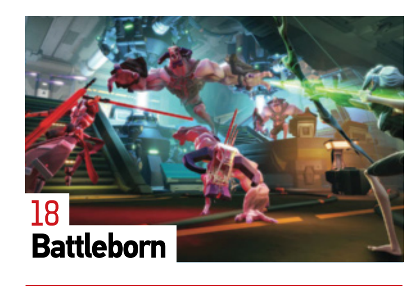

24



2/ 10
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MANGO&
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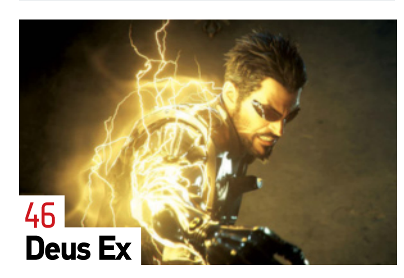
Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 168 | 15



18
Battleborn

PREVIEWS



46
Deus Ex

FAVOURITES



DISCUSS

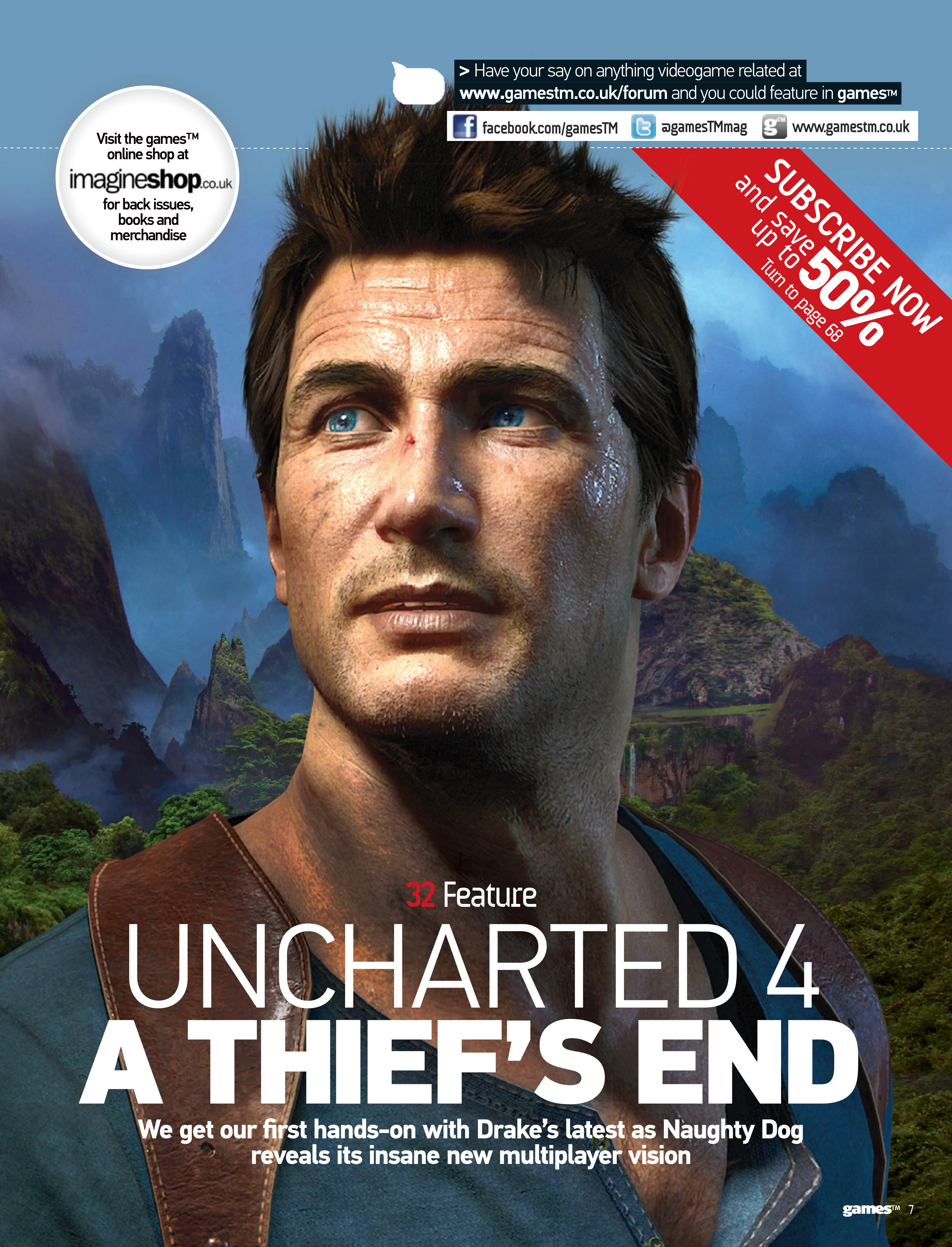


72
Fallout 4

FEATURES

RETRO

REVIEWS



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Turn to page 68
32 Feature
UNCHARTED 4
A THIEF'S END
We get our first hands-on with Drake's latest as Naughty Dog reveals its insane new multiplayer vision

Discuss

NEWS
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OPINION
YOUR VIEWS

(HELLO MIITOMO)



What To Expect From Nintendo's Next Console



→ Nintendo is finally tackling the mobile market… but what does that mean for its next home console?



Nintendo's financial reports for the year of 2015 were weaker than expected. Much weaker. It outlined two things to the company – that its traditional business model wasn't working in this age of online and mobile-focused products, and that, under the direction of its new president Tatsumi Kimishima, it has to try out new tactics if it wants to really compete.

For the first time in five years, Nintendo's stock was reported publicly back in October… but that report revealed Nintendo's actual gross profit fell short of what the software and hardware developer's internal financial analysts forecast – highlighting a weakening Wii U console and ageing 3DS platform. It's time for something new, then, and that's why – on 29 October 2015 – Nintendo announced its first ever official mobile-only game.

Of course, the move into the mobile market was outlined by Nintendo way back in March, but at that point, we knew very little about where the company was actually going to go with it – all we knew was that Nintendo was partnering with DeNA to bring us a game by the end of 2015, and five unique new titles by March 2017.

But in the most recent meeting, Nintendo announced its first title – *Miitomo* – and announced that it's looking carefully at putting mobile games out that can connect with home console devices and handhelds. Nintendo has kept an eye on the telemetry that's been coming out of its more causal recent releases, and is already working on a cloud-based solution to transfer save data between whatever other mobile releases we'll see from it in the upcoming years and whatever other projects we'll see from the hardware side of the company.



DATA STREAM → EPIC GAMES HAS ANNOUNCED ITS LATEST FPS TITLE, CALLED PARAGON

Contents

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On that note, it's worth remembering that Nintendo announced there are already NX development kits out in the wild with developers. Who these developers are remains to be seen, but the fact we're being promised more free-to-play mobile games alongside a whole new console launch is telling. It suggests that whoever has hands on these kits will be adhering to the new IAP-funded model Nintendo wants its mobile games to operate on.

Nintendo is also looking at releasing pay-to-download games, too, however: you pay a one-off price and can download software you own the rights to for good. This could fling open a whole new revenue stream for Nintendo that has traditionally traded on two core tenets: firstly, it appeals to the casual gamer market (a market the developer has an unprecedented level of access to via iOS and Android devices, both in Japan and in the West). Secondly, the company makes a decent whack of its profits through nostalgia – all the brands and IP that Nintendo owns massively aids the company in staying relevant. If it were to release classic NES, SNES, Game Boy, Game Boy Advance or even DS games on mobile devices, it's reasonable to anticipate a huge amount of sales from lapsed gamers and non-Nintendo console-owners alike. It's basically a licence to print money.

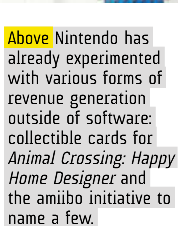
> "[NX] membership will form one of the core elements of the new Nintendo platform"
>
> Satoru Iwata, March 2015

Above Nintendo has already experimented with various forms of revenue generation outside of software: collectible cards for *Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer* and the amiibo initiative to name a few.

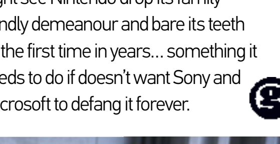
Below Nintendo has a wealth of IP to draw on if it wants to make the most of mobile gaming: *Zelda, Metroid, Mario, Star Fox* and *Pokémon* are all viable paths the publisher could take.

So what does that actually mean for the mysterious Nintendo NX overall, then? It seems to be a console that's erring on the side of casual gamers, dropping the clumsy tablet control interface in favour of – perhaps – our own mobile devices? And yet Nintendo was hesitant to even call *Miitomo* a 'game' in the traditional sense, opting for language more suitable for a communications app (think Whatsapp or even Snapchat). Between this – and its bizarre home-improvement tech the company has been looking at – it stands to reason that the NX itself will be less like a games console than anything the company has put out before, and more like a home hub… similar to what Valve is aiming to do with its Steam machines.

It seems that before his unfortunate passing, Satoru Iwata set Nintendo on a clear path with the NX and the new business ventures the company is experimenting with. Tatsumi Kimishima is a more business-practiced and corporate-oriented CEO than Iwata (who was a self-confessed creative in a suit). This direction might see Nintendo drop its family-friendly demeanour and bare its teeth for the first time in years… something it needs to do if doesn't want Sony and Microsoft to defang it forever.









Reader Reaction

We were curious to see what you – the most hardcore gamers out there – would want to see from the newest Nintendo effort. Your answers didn't disappoint

What Do You Want To See The Most From Nintendo?

- Console Games
- Mobile Games

I'm hoping for a new console from them at the next E3, with a solid line up, a new next gen *Zelda* with a more open world please! @callumelcombe

The NX and what they plan to revolutionise this time. Nintendo always brings the best ideas, even if the public don't grasp them. @marksnodden

I honestly think Nintendo have lost all their appeal over the last 3-4 years and now they are making cash in mobile games. @OUGOfficial

It'll be interesting to see where Nintendo go in the mobile sector, but AAA console games and the 'NX' take priority in my book! @TGK_22

I feel like people are forgetting *Pokémon Go* releases early next year. Plenty of geocaching accidents to be had! @AlexisTrust

Region-free games/consoles, making this old-fashioned and outdated company finally interesting again :| @irgei

Console. Despite their best intentions, N's mobile games will only tend towards grubby IAP factories, same as everyone else's. @beemoh


EXPECT SKYLANDERS AND COD FILMS SOON, AS ACTIVISION OPENS ITS OWN TV AND FILM STUDIO

(WATCH THIS SPACE)

DayZ creator's $2.5 million gamble

→ We speak to visionary developer Dean Hall about his plans for a space-age MMO with an emergent narrative and in-game government made up of its own developers…



You became well known for *DayZ* – which was originally made as an *ARMA* mod. Was working from scratch a faster process?

So *ION* is a game that has been in prototype form for quite a while but has been in development for about [18] months proper now, working with London company Improbable and RocketWerkz, the company I set up. But it was a faster process. What helped from the start was Improbable's technology. All the tech was done and all the team I've been working with have really helped us. Working with guys who have worked on *Gravity* (film), *Fallout*, *RYSE* and loads of other games. It's what has helped us to get to a workable prototype.

So it could be argued you're making a triple-A game?

Well, that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to find the best people and I wanted to make the game I really wanted to play. *ION* is a really difficult game to explain to someone, so no way can I get a publisher interested. This was the perfect game to make with triple-A developers and then just show a prototype to Xbox.

Like other games in production right now – *Hellblade, Star Citizen* – it sounds like you're blurring the line between triple-A and indie.

Yeah, it's quite a big budget for an indie game. It's quite a big budget game, I've pumped 2.5 million cash into the title.



Above Having the developer's own characters in-game is an interesting social experiment.

But that doesn't necessarily go very far in Farringdon [laughs].

It must be difficult trying to demo a game like that to the public?

OK, so it's easy to explain what it isn't. It isn't *Star Citizen*, *Elite Dangerous* or *EVE Online*. This is about what's going on about on the station. We wanted to get back to what made *Ultima Online* so amazing. You're a character on a station and you choose how to live your life. You can be an adventurer, trader, or whatever you want to do. You can also rent space, so you could build a space station and then get people to run businesses in your station, like a restaurant or a bar or whatever you want to do. It's an isometric 3D game, kinda like a *Diablo III* angled camera. This was the easiest way of making it look good without having to make a stupid amount of assets like animations and everything else.

And it wouldn't be a Dean Hall game without an impending, terrifying sense of danger, right?

[laughs] Well, I suppose. We're not aiming for *DayZ* levels of craziness. It's an MMO so we have a Reputation system, either for the Federation or other players. You could go



CONVENTION DARLING AND PS4 EXCLUSIVE SHADOW OF THE BEAST HAS BEEN DATED FOR 27 JANUARY ON PSN

out and murder someone but it would then pop up a contract for other players to go and investigate your death. So we're definitely working on a tacit of 'be good' or at least don't get caught. We don't want a slaughterfest but at the same time you will die from accidents as well.

So, apart from murdering, what other motivations are there for the players in-game?
Well, it's all about building up your reputation so you will likely start off as a security guard, wandering about and doing checks but then you could be a janitor and go clean up other people's sick. With time you'll be able to create your own businesses and produce consumables like 'space cola' or whatever you want to call it.

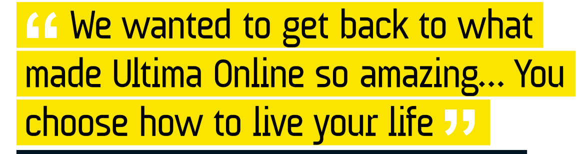
Do you think some players might see the idea of 'space janitor simulator' a little dull?
I suppose to some it could sound like that but I'm making a game you have to invest time in, creating a massive world which will obviously change over time and it's going to be super cool to see what happens. I don't wish to sound arrogant but I really want to make another game based off of *SPACE STATION 13*. As the developers we have an element of control, as we're the Federation in the game.

So the developers are the police in the game? You're the government in your MMO?
Yep; we will employ deputies to fix the problems in the game universe. An example might be players talking out of character – it's based 150 years in the future but players might interact out of character, talking about real-life stuff and in our world these players would be considered as 'crazy'. We would send a deputy to have them taken to a player-run penal colony. We want to get clans involved in doing these contracts and running these in-game businesses.





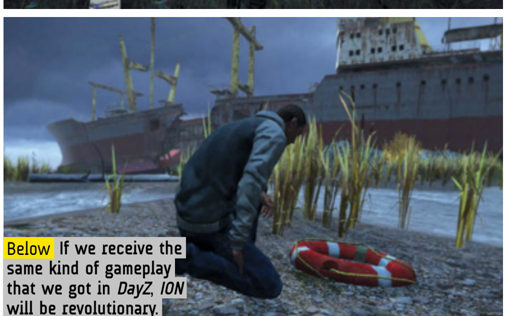
Inset The premise of a narratively-led MMO game in space is as exciting as it is terrifying.



> "We wanted to get back to what made Ultima Online so amazing… You choose how to live your life"
> Dean Hall, founder and creator, RocketWerkz







Below If we receive the same kind of gameplay that we got in *DayZ*, *ION* will be revolutionary.





IN THE FIRING LINE

■ DEAN HALL himself is going to be playing a character in *ION* – a real, vulnerable character in the world that can live and die like the rest of us. "I will be playing an important character but I can't say anything about that right now. I might have a second character that no-one knows about. Rise from nothing, and all that!" We asked Hall what would happen if someone found – and killed – this 'important' in-game person, and he smiled and said "that'd definitely make the politics of the game very interesting".

REFUNDS ARE BEING OFFERED FOR THE PC VERSION OF BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT UNTIL THE END OF 2015

Can Yo-Kai Watch crack the Western market?

> "You could defer to internet forums rather than the advice of friends, but that's a dangerous game to play"

Yo-Kai Watching

For the most part, it feels like the age when games came out in Japan years before anywhere else is done. There's the odd exception, sure – an oddity that gets picked up for localisation long after launch for instance – but generally, all the major players seem to be either hitting, targetting or moving towards global release dates. It's a positive step as in this connected generation, importing is easier than ever. I have no fewer than five different PSN accounts to make sure I don't miss out anything, and I'm sure I'm not alone on this one. But with Nintendo still refusing to budge on region locking, its chances of turning *Yo-Kai Watch* into a global phenomenon rather than just a Japanese one might not be all that great.

The setup is almost exactly the same here – new game about catching monsters comes out and its home country goes nuts for it for a few years before it emerges elsewhere in the world. The crucial difference here, though, is direct word of mouth. Anyone excited for *Pokémon* before it finally got a European release could freely import and play any existing version, in turn likely becoming evangelists for the brand. The staggered release actually worked in *Pokémon*'s favour – I have a friend who ran a game shop when *Red* and *Blue* first launched in the US and he couldn't get his hands on enough copies. With region locking, that simply wouldn't happen today, leaving only those with imported hardware to spread the good word. You could defer to internet forums and such rather than the advice and preaching of close friends, but that's a dangerous game to play. The same level of trust can't really be achieved without seeing someone next to you fire up a new game, raving about how great it is, and that's why I can't see the *Yo-Kai Watch* mania that grips Japan spreading all that quickly, if at all.

By all accounts, it's a solid game and like *Pokémon*, it has an anime and all kinds of branded tat to back it up. But we see mobile devs try to bottle lightning all too often today, swinging and missing repeatedly when attempting to recreate an overnight success story. It's a far more fickle market than it once was, and part of that can in fact be traced back to the mobile sector. *Pokémon*'s success, from a gaming perspective at least, was helped by its novelty and the fact that a Game Boy was the only way to experience its exciting collaborative monster-catching adventure. Now, there are browser games, emulators, mobile copycats and the real deal already established in the field *Yo-Kai Watch* is looking to break into and, quality product or no, that's gonna be a damn hard sell.

But crazes are near impossible to predict, so I could yet be wrong. The important thing, though, is that just because something is super-successful in Japan doesn't mean that frenzy will carry over to the rest of the world. I mean, just look at my beloved *Monster Hunter*…



Luke Albigés is Editor of **Play** magazine and given his obsession with Pokémon, he'll be all over Yo-Kai Watch by the time you read this

Import Watch

→ JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Eyes Of Heaven

We played the demo that went up for this way back in January but even now, having had so long to process what was going on, we're still utterly baffled by it. An arena brawler at its core with tag teams of fabulous fighters going at it, this is an odd hybrid of *Power Stone* and *Naruto Ultimate Ninja* (it's by the same team, CyberConnect2). *JoJo* fans should be well served, but it's also a chaotic and amusing party fighter that anyone can enjoy, even if they don't know what is going on, which they won't.





IN LOS ANGELES, KONAMI HAS CLOSED KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS, THE DEVELOPER OF METAL GEAR ONLINE

Hoverboard

Self Balancing Scooter

UK STORE - **UK 3 PIN PLUG** -12 MONTH WARRANTY



> "Great warriors don't go down without a fight, and Halo is ready to return"

Halo the Conqueror

It wasn't so long ago that in the eSports scene it would be new IPs helping us to get our vitamin D deficiency as new titles took greater advantage of new technologies, innovated more and generally left legacy titles built from the days of LAN connections in the dust; nowadays it's the job of sequels and remakes. So this Autumn we are blessed with a game which is not only a sequel but includes flashbacks to some of the many highlights its franchise has produced over the last decade. I'm talking about *Halo 5*, which is not only back with a flashy single-player campaign (not that I would be seen playing such a thing), but also with a mission to regain the crown it once wore with pride.

Halo is the undisputed king and founder of console eSports as we know it. I say this in the full knowledge that we had *Quake 3* on Dreamcast and of course *GoldenEye 007* on N64, but neither of these games came close to reaching the heights that *Halo* soared to in establishing a console eSports scene. But as with all empires, the quest for world dominance began to turn into overreaching and came to a crashing end. When this particular giant began to waver a few years ago, it was replaced by an even bigger one: *Call Of Duty*.

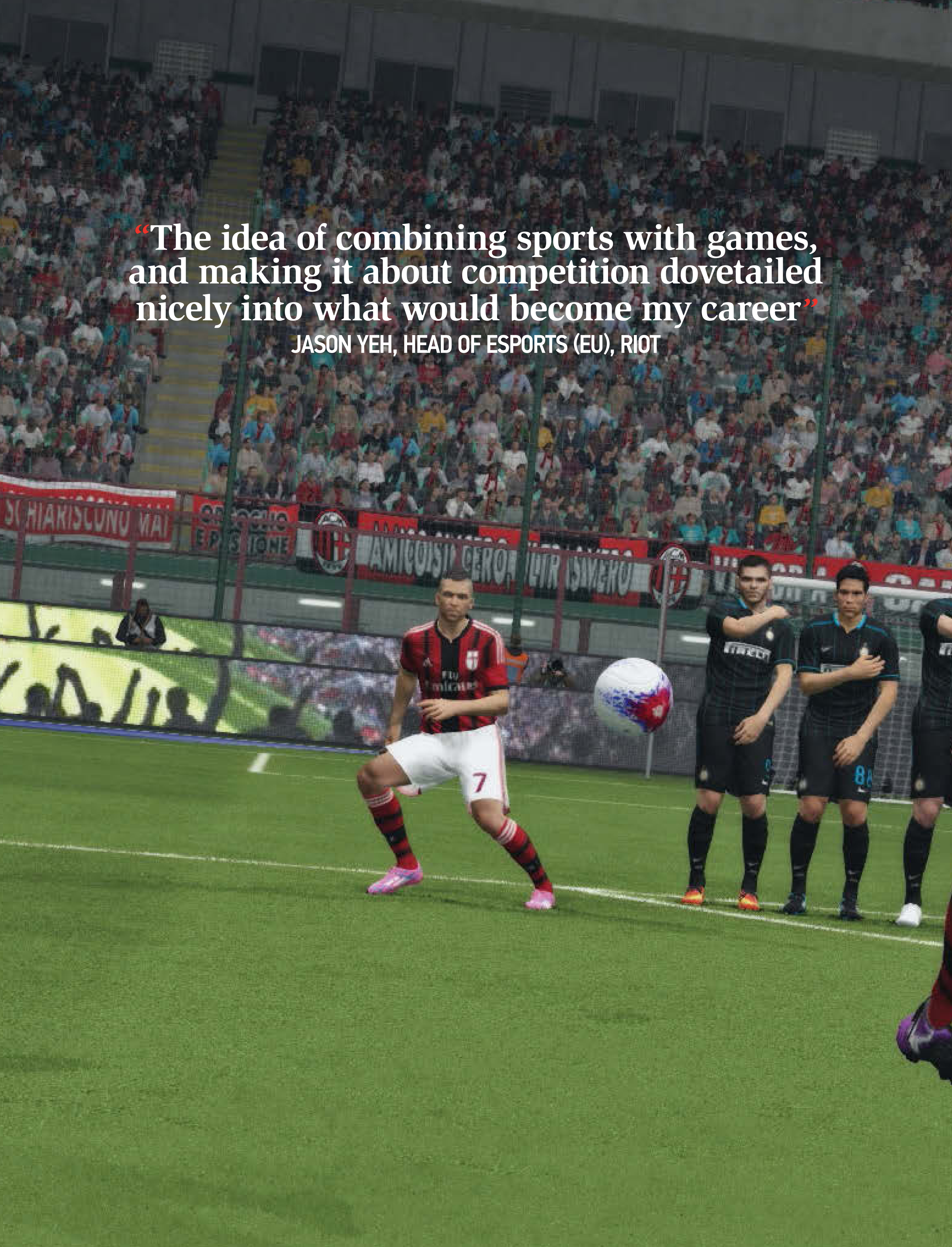
But great warriors don't go down without a fight and *Halo* is once more ready to return. Everything about the multiplayer feels geared towards competition and action that can please crowds of spectators. Taking on a franchise such as *Call Of Duty* is certainly not for the faint-hearted and today's playing field has changed beyond all recognition to the one that *Halo* walked off before. It is no longer acceptable to just have a great game in your locker and a solid online infrastructure. No, nowadays you need to have world championships.

Which is exactly what 343 has: The Halo World Championship with over 1.5 million dollars on the line. One of the most impressive prize purses from a single-game focused competition you'll find. As you can imagine, many people have flocked to *Halo* once more, reacquainting themselves with the classic Battle Rifle and Energy Sword. The challenge, though, remains that people really enjoy *Halo* for the game it is rather than the bait it is offering. Nods to the pro gaming scene give it credit and the chance of longevity, but it still needs respect and wide appeal to gather the crowds. Only then will a new era of world dominance begin.


Paul Kent has over 16 years experience in the eSports industry and is currently eSports Director at the UK's leading eSports company Gfinity


The multiplayer side of *Halo 5: Guardians* is one of the strongest in the series, offering a wide array of gameplay modes and potential for more with the release of Forge.


THE NEW XBOX ONE EXPERIENCE UI HAS DROPPED KINECT GESTURE CONTROL, BUT NOT VOICE COMMANDS



> “The idea of combining sports with games, and making it about competition dovetailed nicely into what would become my career”
>
> **JASON YEH, HEAD OF ESPORTS (EU), RIOT**



WHY I ♥...

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER

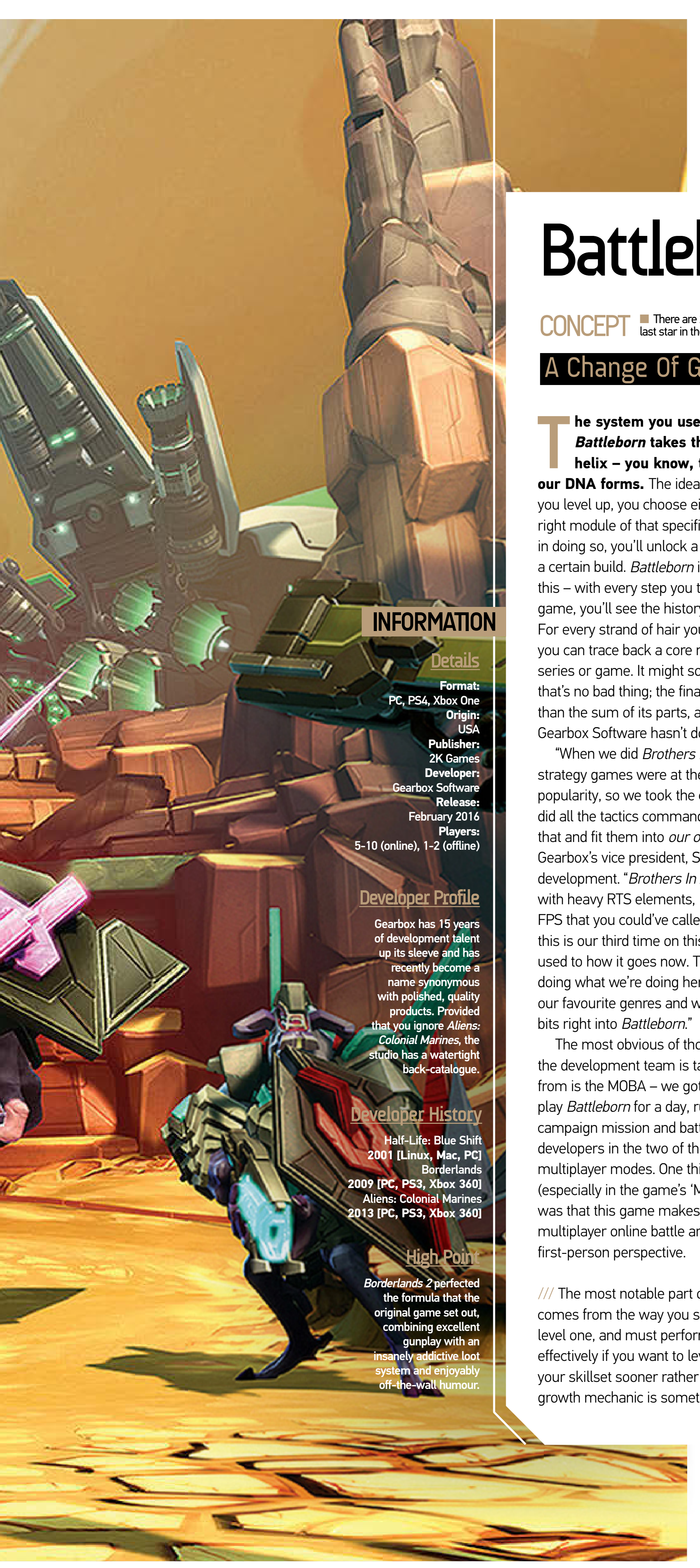
JASON YEH, HEAD OF ESPORTS (EU), RIOT

“*A lot of my gaming background was in sports games, so I grew up in the US playing a lot of* Madden, *but most of my friends in Asia were huge fans of* Winning Eleven *– or* PES, *now. The idea of combining sports with games, and making it about competition dovetailed nicely into what would become my career. The reason people care so much about eSports is that they like to play the sport or the game themselves, but there's excitement to be had in the way they can enjoy the best people in the world playing, too. I loved* PES *because it introduced me to that intersection of games and sports.*”



"We're taking all our favourite genres and we're putting the best bits right into Battleborn"

STEVE GIBSON VICE PRESIDENT, GEARBOX SOFTWARE



Battleborn

CONCEPT ■ There are 25 people left – the so-called "Battleborn" – who can prevent the last star in the universe from dying at the hands of an encroaching dark force

A Change Of Gear(box)

The system you use to level up in *Battleborn* takes the form of a double helix – you know, that shape that our DNA forms. The idea is that every time you level up, you choose either the left or right module of that specific DNA strand, and in doing so, you'll unlock a power relevant to a certain build. *Battleborn* itself is much like this – with every step you take further into the game, you'll see the history of its development. For every strand of hair you pull from its head, you can trace back a core mechanic to another series or game. It might sound derivative but that's no bad thing; the final product is stronger than the sum of its parts, and it's not like Gearbox Software hasn't done this before.

"When we did *Brothers In Arms*, real-time strategy games were at the height of their popularity, so we took the command view and did all the tactics commands and things like that and fit them into *our own* game," explains Gearbox's vice president, Steve Gibson, of the development. "*Brothers In Arms* was an FPS with heavy RTS elements, *Borderlands* was an FPS that you could've called an action-RPG… this is our third time on this rodeo and we're used to how it goes now. That's why we're doing what we're doing here – we're taking all our favourite genres and we're putting the best bits right into *Battleborn*."

The most obvious of those genres that the development team is taking inspiration from is the MOBA – we got to sit down and play *Battleborn* for a day, running through a campaign mission and battling it out against developers in the two of the game's three multiplayer modes. One thing we noticed online (especially in the game's 'Meltdown' mode) was that this game makes you play it like a multiplayer online battle arena, albeit from a first-person perspective.

/// The most notable part of this MOBA-like feel comes from the way you start every game at level one, and must perform tasks quickly and effectively if you want to level up and access your skillset sooner rather than later. This growth mechanic is something you'd see in the likes of *League Of Legends* and we found it actually makes your team *want* to play the objective in multiplayer matches – something our experience with traditional shooters like *Call Of Duty* or *Rainbow Six: Siege* often lacks.

"The short character-growth ramp actually comes from *Warcraft III*, which itself was the precursor to *LOL* and *DOTA* and everything," explains Gibson. "The one element from MOBAs that's *really* in here, though, are minions (or creeps). You'll see in our escort mode – Meltdown – we use minions. We saw them in MOBA matches and thought 'We'd love to see those in a shooter', so here they are! There are all these mechanics in *Battleborn*, from all these types of games we're pulling them from, but MOBAs are the latest 'hotness' of genre so it's the one people notice more."

"Meltdown – my personal favourite mode – really gets to show off some of the variety we have in character playstyle," continues Randy Varnell, *Battleborn*'s creative director. "In Meltdown, one of the AI in the universe who was in charge of minion recycling has gone berserk, and fancies himself as an angry robot volcano god, and demands you sacrifice him minions to earn his appeasement. He's going to give you points for recycling robots, which means you have to escort them through recycling gates, whilst preventing the other team from doing the same." If it sounds like a MOBA, well, it's because it kind of is… but that's only one of the player-versus-player modes *Battleborn* has to offer.

The other one that we got to play – Capture – is basically a three-point capture map that encourages the dominance and holding of command points. It'll be familiar to anyone who has ever played *Halo*, *Destiny* or *Call Of Duty*, and is designed for players coming to *Battleborn* from those games. You earn points as you hold a checkpoint, first to 1000 wins. Simple as that.

Thing is, in games like *Call Of Duty* and *Halo*, you'll have predetermined equipment and totally customisable classes, so the balancing of characters comes down to making sure there's no 'best gun' to have in your primary

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Gearbox Software
Release: February 2016
Players: 5-10 (online), 1-2 (offline)

Developer Profile

Gearbox has 15 years of development talent up its sleeve and has recently become a name synonymous with polished, quality products. Provided that you ignore *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, the studio has a watertight back-catalogue.

Developer History

Half-Life: Blue Shift
2001 [Linux, Mac, PC]
Borderlands
2009 [PC, PS3, Xbox 360]
Aliens: Colonial Marines
2013 [PC, PS3, Xbox 360]

High Point

Borderlands 2 perfected the formula that the original game set out, combining excellent gunplay with an insanely addictive loot system and enjoyably off-the-wall humour.

weapon slot, and no 'best gun' to have in your sidearm slot and so on. *Battleborn* is different – it has 25 characters, each with their own unique powers, weapons and playstyles. Some are support, some are melee-based, some are artillery and some are ranged. We played as Benedict for the majority of our playthrough – he's a birdperson that can fly up in the air and pop slow but damaging missiles down on the players below. We played him because we were pitched against a QA tester who excelled with short-ranged attacker Rath, and we were *terrified* of him – he routinely cut the rest of our team down where they stood as we circled overhead, cawing for our lost companions and trying to potshot the swordsman with our grenade launcher.

"It's an on-going struggle, man," Gibson exhales when we ask him just how the hell you balance a game like this. "It's the biggest thing we've ever taken on [at Gearbox]. When you play *Brothers In Arms* or *Borderlands*, you're playing solo or co-op, and the PvP in *Borderlands*, as it was, was a fun sideshow. For *Battleborn*, though, we had to build it from the start knowing that we'd use the Shift Golden Key system to constantly balance and track [telemetry]. That's the thing we're testing most – the plan is that it breaks at least a few times before we can fix it [laughs]".

/// All of this is supported by that now-classic Gearbox aesthetic: that oddly nostalgic stylised art that's more reminiscent of a medley on Nineties cartoons than anything specific. From characters inspired by Gundam mechs to ninjas made out of mushrooms to a robot overlord that looks like *Final Fantasy XIII*'s final boss, it seems almost intentional that the variety in *Battleborn*'s art is mimicked in its gameplay.

"That's all Scott Kester, our art director," nods Gibson – he and Kester are good friends, and apparently played *Street Fighter IV* in the Gearbox offices at 5pm every day for over a year. "He really art-directed the hell out of this game [laughs]. He was actually lead character design artist on *Borderlands*, and you put that guy in charge of art for the entire game and this is what you get. We put conditions on him, though, that he had to meet – we didn't just let him go wild and do what he liked. The style, with its cartoon aesthetic, is intentional for two reasons: we knew we were going to have a universe that featured many, many different characters, and we knew we needed an art style that feels relevant for all of those characters. We needed an art style that would suitably feel right for all these character classes, and would make everything *belong* in this one setting. We also wanted an art style that would support diversity in colour – so then all these attacks and their effects and colours would communicate something different when you play. I feel like [Kester] nailed it – I love the art."

Gibson was right about the language of the colour – sometimes, there's so much going on on-screen that it's almost impossible to tell what's going on. *Almost*. The design lessons – from character silhouettes and colour identification to the FPS viewpoint and impeccable UI – has all improved from *Borderlands*.

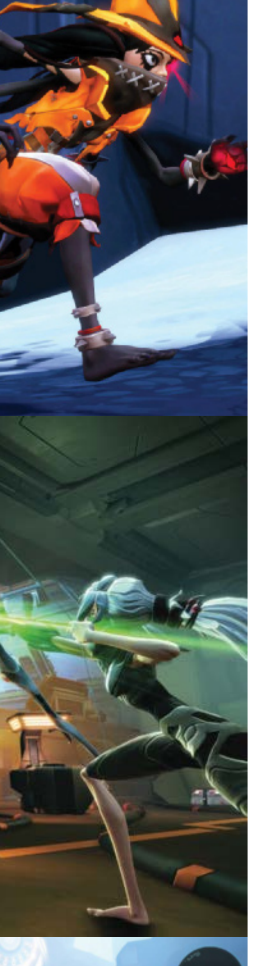
> "That's all Scott Kester, our art director. He really art-directed the hell out of this game"
> **STEVE GIBON** VICE PRESIDENT, GEARBOX SOFTWARE

Gearbox hasn't rested on its laurels with *Battleborn*, not at all. We were dubious before our hands-on, but to be honest, we've come away from the game wanting to get better acquainted with the MOBA setup just so we've got more of an idea of what to expect from *Battleborn* proper when it launches. It's got all the best bits of the genres it's aping from - fighting games, shooters, MOBAs, MMOs, RPGs and procedural loot generators… it's ambitious, but it wouldn't be a Gearbox game if it wasn't.





Above: When you've got a team of four people playing co-op against the game's AI, it's basically chaos: so much is happening on-screen, it's a testament to Gearbox that you can actually understand the action.
Right: Finding combinations of characters that complement each others' skillsets and have the synergy you need to overcome certain obstacles is a big part of the game's appeal - we're looking forward to diving into the meta and figuring out the *best* teams in the game.





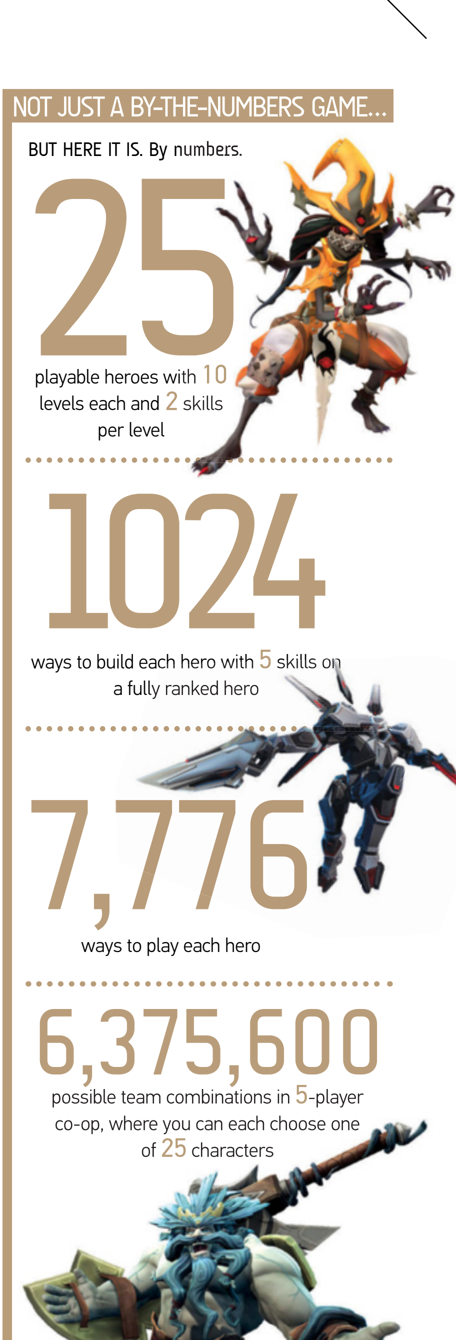




Above: The aesthetic of the game has enough personality to make it unique, while retaining that now famous *Borderlands* style.

NOT JUST A BY-THE-NUMBERS GAME...

BUT HERE IT IS. By numbers.



25

playable heroes with 10 levels each and 2 skills per level

1024

ways to build each hero with 5 skills on a fully ranked hero

7,776

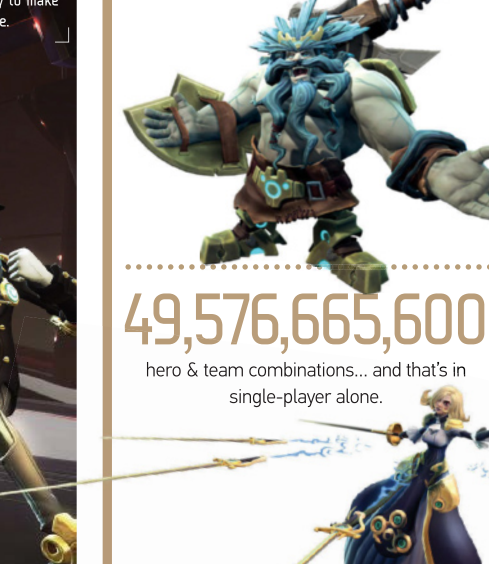
ways to play each hero

6,375,600

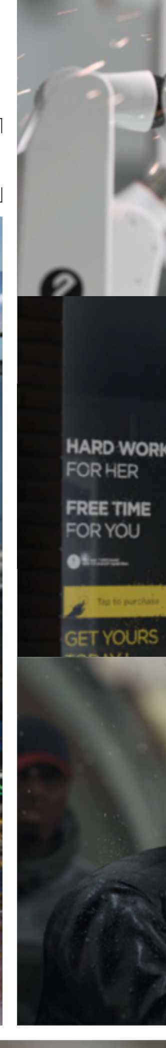
possible team combinations in 5-player co-op, where you can each choose one of 25 characters

49,576,665,600

hero & team combinations... and that's in single-player alone.



Right: The android assembly process from the *Kara* demo has been given a fresh lick of PS4 paint. Will we have to assemble Kara via QTEs? Odder things have happened. Below: Detroit, unsurprisingly, is the setting for *Become Human* and it looks like Motown has had something of a *Minority Report*-esque spruce up. Thankfully, Cage and company haven't gone too future crazy, but we're not so sure about those zeppelins.





CASTING CALL

DETAILS ARE VERY thin on the ground when it comes to *Detroit: Become Human* – including the cast itself – but we do know that Valorie Curry (who played Kara in the original PS3 tech demo) will be reprising her role as the emotional android with ideas above her station. Sure, she hasn't quite got the credentials of Ellen Page or Willem Dafoe, but she's still got a few memorable performances to her name. She had a standout role in the first two seasons of serial killer procedural *The Following* (think Kevin Bacon, only with fewer mobile phones shoved down your throat) as well as making regular appearances on cult TV show *Veronica Mars*.



Right: The original *Kara* demo was created to showcase a brand new engine, one that would eventually go on to power the excellent motion and facial capture used on *Beyond: Two Souls*. It seems likely an updated version of the same tech will be used for *Detroit*.



Detroit: Become Human

CONCEPT ■ A new interactive, filmic experience from Quantic Dream that aims to tackle the fragility of identity and humanity

Do former PS3 tech demos dream of electric sheep?

His games may rank among the industry's most divisive experiences, but that hasn't stopped Quantic Dream founder and CEO David Cage from blurring the line between videogames and cinema with wanton abandon. His latest offering, the obtusely-titled *Detroit: Become Human*, aims to pick up that filmic baton and carry it all the way to PS4.

It all started with *Kara*. Three years ago, while *Beyond: Two Souls* was still in development for PS3, Quantic Dream unleashed a new tech demo at the 2012 Games Developer Conference – its slick production values and perfectly-synced animations showed just how realistic a world could be using swiftly advancing motion capture tech. With Kara (the plucky android that dared to break her programming with an assortment of human emotions) as its lead, the seven-minute presentation became an overnight industry darling. It wasn't representative of a game in production or one that was intended to be developed later, but with the original video racking up more than 27 million views, Sony and Quantic Dream clearly saw some potential in the sentient android.

According to Cage, *Detroit* will follow Kara's life after the exchange in the three-year-old demo, where she was originally intended to be decommissioned after expressing some unexpectedly human qualities, eventually gaining freedom after appealing to a soppy-hearted off-screen evaluator. The announcement trailer showed of a semi-futuristic Detroit (the game is set in the Motor City, if you hadn't already twigged) with Kara passing through a country slowly growing more resentful by the presence of their replicant-esque servants.

> "We wondered how we – humans – would react if we were confronted with a new form of intelligence"
>
> **DAVID CAGE** QUANTIC DREAM

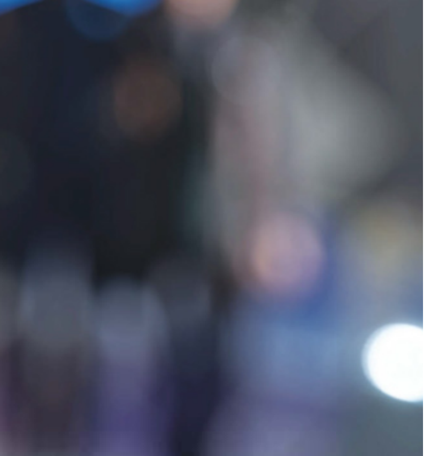
Cage is being uncharacteristically tight-lipped about the finer details of Detroit's gameplay, but he has confirmed it'll take a few cues from previous games. It will be very, very different, he told press as the game was revealed for the first time, but offering some exciting new takes on similar concepts. We're expecting plenty of button prompts and a splash of consequence to your actions, then. Interestingly, Cage isn't lounging in the writer and director's chair alone this time, either – he's now been joined by two other writers and another creative director, all of whom have experience ranging from games to film.

/// This TV-style setup has been in the director's mind for a while. Cage has explained that he has been interested in the showrunner model more commonly seen in TV and seeing how that might be applied to game design. Could Quantic Dream be opting for the popular episodic format with *Detroit*? It's certainly done no harm to other emotive coming-of-age stories, like *Life Is Strange*. While the singular creative voice of Cage has been fun to follow, we can't deny having something a little more collaborative from this team could prove more fruitful.

The 'AI finding its humanity in a world that does not recognise it' trope has been done to death in games and beyond, but if anyone can bring a new and intriguing take to the party, it's David Cage and his team.

The sci-fi setting also has us a little worried – with *Call Of Duty* now firmly in the realm of advanced warfare in almost all of its incarnations and *Deus Ex* preparing to re-augment itself with *Mankind Divided* next year, PS4 is getting a little over-crowded with weird future oddness. Could we all have cyber-fatigue by the time *Detroit* finally arrives? Hopefully not, but you never know.

There's no release date as yet for *Detroit* (or any evidence that what we've seen in the announce trailer will even make it into the final game), but we do know that the whole thing was captured in-game on a PS4. Despite the familiar sci-fi setting, we're still more than a little excited by *Detroit*. *Beyond: Two Souls* felt like something of an expensive misstep for the studio, but if Cage and his new writers can channel the magic that made *Heavy Rain* so compelling, then *Detroit* could be one to watch in the coming years.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Quantic Dream
Release: TBC
Players: 1

Developer Profile

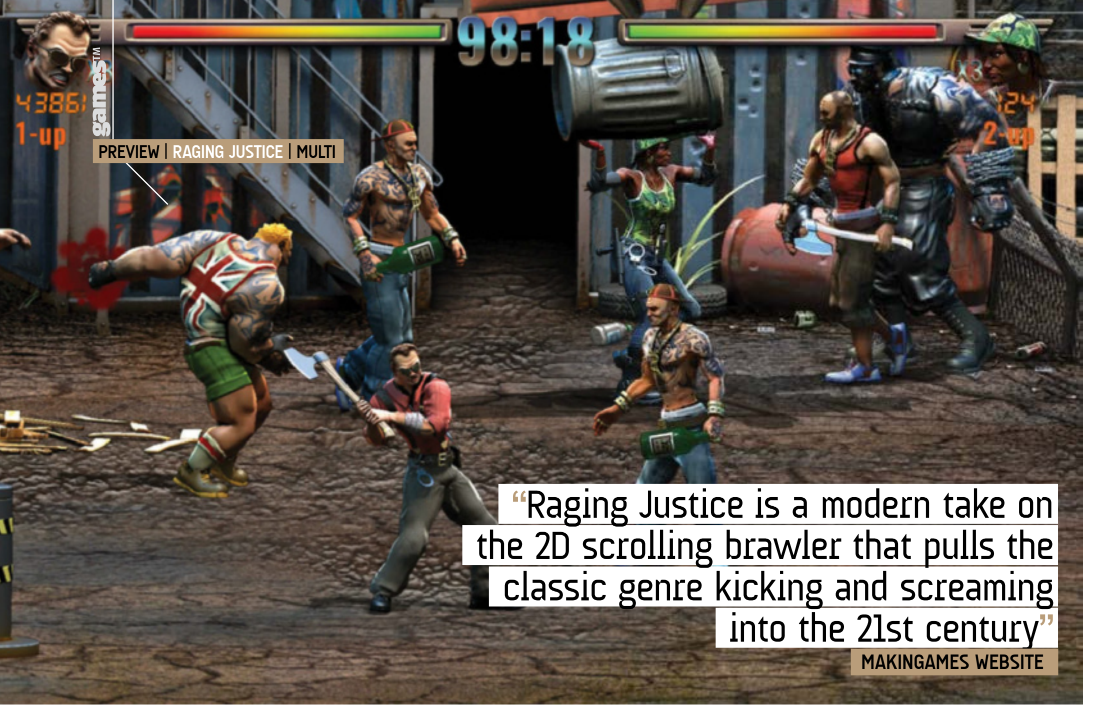
At the head of Quantic Dream, the French studio he founded back in 1997, David Cage has become one of the most recognisable and outspoken developers in the industry. As potentially controversial as his creative choices have been, Cage has taken the QTE, the interactive cutscene and the concept of consequence-based gameplay to new heights.

Developer History

The Nomad Soul
1999 [PC, Dreamcast]
Fahrenheit
2005 [PS2, Xbox, PC]
Heavy Rain
2010 [PS3, PS4]
Beyond: Two Souls
2013 [PS3, PS4]

High Point

It may have spawned enough memes to fill a small corner of the universe, but 2010's *Heavy Rain* was Cage and Quantic Dream on true form thanks to its intertwined stories, noir crime vibe and inexplicable French accents.



"Raging Justice is a modern take on the 2D scrolling brawler that pulls the classic genre kicking and screaming into the 21st century"
MAKINGAMES WEBSITE



Above: Although you can pick up weapons and wallop the enemy thugs, as a cop you can arrest the criminals instead of smashing them.

Raging Justice

CONCEPT A nostalgic side-scrolling beat-em-up of the sort that filled the arcades of old, albeit with HD graphics and ear-splitting HD audio.

Killer instinct for modern retro

From *Streets Of Rage* to *Raging Justice*, it may seem that the side-scrolling brawler hasn't changed much over the past 24 years. Here we have a three-level demo packed with thugs that can be dispatched in numerous ways thanks to a wide range of combos, items dotted around that can be picked up and used, and some fiendish end-of-level bosses. Deja vu, anyone?

But there is no shame in harking back to the Eighties and early Nineties as long as you bring something new to the table and that's what *Raging Justice* does. It may pay a nostalgic, cheesy homage to the genre with its 'continues' and maverick cops called Rick Justice and Nikki Rage, but it also seeks to move the brawler into the 21st century.

Developer Nic Makin tells us that beat-em-ups have been "sorely in need of updating" and you can see the steps being made to improve them. There is a modern soundtrack made for surround sound systems composed by Steve Burke and high-definition 2D visuals by artist Jay Howse, which deliberately provoke fuzzy feelings for the pre-rendered look used in games such as *Donkey Kong Country* and *Killer Instinct*.

On top of that, the controls correct past 'wrongs': there are four buttons rather than the traditional two, with one set aside for picking up weapons and another dedicated to jumping. As you bash the enemy into submission, you can make a choice: carry on hitting them in order to knock them out or just arrest them. Your decision will indicate if you are a good or bad cop. Genius.

There is also a greater sense of maturity in the gameplay. The enemy AI has various patterns and strategies that you have to learn to defeat and the characters develop as you play the game, with bosses mixing things up. "We are introducing new gameplay as you play through – riding the Tractor on the Junkyard level has been a highlight of the shows," says Makin.

It also helps that you can simply pick up and play the game. It's so accessible that there is no tutorial section; to insert one would be to patronise gamers of a certain era, we feel. "Every part of the game is designed for the sake of enjoyment, from how the player fights to the enemy AI, to the weapons and the vehicles," says Makin.

He also says there are some features which will not be included from launch. Online multiplayer, alternate game modes such as a Bar Brawl (where players must survive wave after wave of enemies) and new playable characters are planned to come later. As it stands, though, it's beating a strong path to our hearts.



The visuals are 2D and pre-rendered but they look great in HD thanks to the use of modern graphics techniques.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC, Mac, Mobile
Origin: United Kingdom
Publisher: MakinGames
Developer: In-House
Release: Q1 2016
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

MakinGames was set up in 2014 by husband and wife, Nic and Anna Makin. Nic worked at Rare for 10 years and is currently employed by Precious Blue Dot but together with freelance artist Jay Howse and musician Steve Burke, he has been making *Raging Justice* in his spare time. Anna is the game's co-director and is also responsible for both marketing and publishing the title.

Developer History

Kameo: Elements of Power **2005 [360]**
Perfect Dark Zero **2005 [360]**
Kinect Sports **2010 [360]**

High Point

When Nic Makin and the Rare team began working on *Kameo: Elements of Power* it was intended for the Gamecube. They helped turn it into one of the Xbox 360's most well-received launch titles.



Ratchet & Clank

CONCEPT ■ A furry engineer and his little metal friend set off on a quest to grab loads of money and have a good time – oh, and save the world, too

Save the galaxy for the first time, again

This isn't just a remake, or an upscale, or a rerelease. No, this is a full honest-to-god new game – where Insomniac will retread ground that really put them on the map back in the golden age of the PS2. *Ratchet & Clank* has a special place in the heart of a lot of console gamers: it was a watershed moment for gamers that grew up on a diet of *Crash Bandicoot*, *Spyro The Dragon*, *Pandemonium!*, and *Croc* – alongside Jak and Daxter, Ratchet and Clank charted the maturity of the 3D action platformer. And it did it within the skin of a colourful, intergalactic space opera that had an indisputable appeal to kids and adults and everyone in between.

Sceptics might balk at this remake – 'What's the point in just doing the same game again?' they'll ask, and rightly so. The answer is dual-pronged: firstly, there's a new movie coming out. A *Ratchet & Clank* movie, and the game is timed to release alongside that. Secondly, Insomniac wants to dig a little deeper into the meat of Ratchet's backstory, to study the bizarre universe he lives in a bit deeper, to reset the canon… to bring the action platformer kicking and screaming back into the current generation.

Insomniac is using the base game as a template for the PS4 version, but with some pretty major differences. Firstly, there's more effort put into the focus of this game – the original draft of the game (with its platforming, its puzzles and its weaponry) felt a bit like a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. The boss fights were functional at best, and the Clank sections were, well, clanky. Now, though, Insomniac has taken everything it learnt from *Sunset Overdrive* and wrapped it in that lightly cinematic *Ratchet & Clank* skin – the gunplay is basic but fun, the level design is interesting and compelling, and the boss fights actually feel challenging and consequential. This is everything that PS4 launch title *Knack* promised to be.

On the gunplay side of things, it's nice to note that Insomniac isn't resting on its laurels and simply importing the weapons from the original game into this one and leaving it at that. No, instead, Insomniac Games is compiling a sort of 'best of' selection from the entire five-game series and unceremoniously cramming them into this new version.

/// When it comes to the licence the game's being made with, we remain dubious, though; whilst the game itself handles amazingly (we played an action platform section set on a gravitational train and a boss-fight with the fantastically named Snagglebeast), we have reason to suspect the development time is hard-wired to the movie release. We hope to see as much content (if not more) as the original game, but that remains to be seen… also, the credentials of the studio behind the film aren't exactly stellar: ever heard of *Barbie: The Princess & The Popstar* or *Heavy Gear*? No, neither have we.

It's not worth focusing on the film side of things, though: the game itself looks fantastic – if having all the old levels and sensibilities of the series re-done with all the power under the hood of the PS4 isn't enough to sell you on Insomniac's latest, maybe the new animations and the ever-brightening colour palette are. The studio isn't just cashing in on nostalgia, either: Insomniac has actually rehired original developers of the first game to work on the reboot, so the title doesn't just *look* like the pure-blood *Ratchet & Clank* games, it will *feel* like them, too.

Design director Brian Allgeier, studio director Chad Dezern and game director Shaun McCabe are leading the project – they're the same three people that led the original *Ratchet & Clank* project back in 2002. Oh, and the same composer – Michael Bross – is composing new and re-recorded music for the remake, too. That, and the Pixar-esque animation running in a smooth and relevant 30 frames per second, makes this game one of the best presented 3D platformers to grace consoles this generation.

> "Featuring all-new boss fights, several new planets, new flight sequences, and much more – with completely new visuals constructed to take advantage of [the] PS4"
>
> INSOMNIAC GAMES WEBSITE



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Insomniac Games
Release: Spring 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

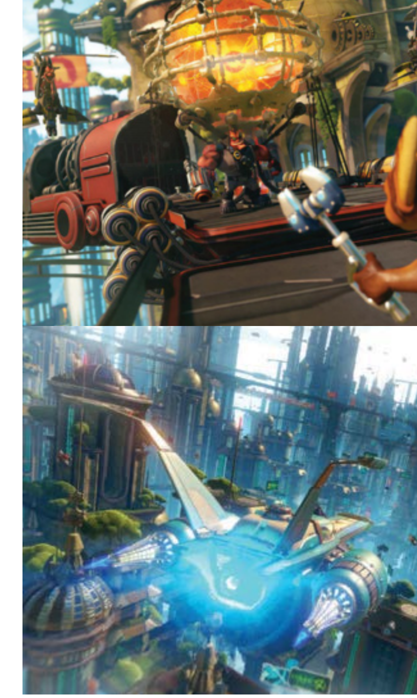
Based in California, the studio is famously headed up by leading developer Ted Price and has an affiliation with Sony since the PlayStation era (a trend that was broken by the company's infamous game, *Fuse*). A resilient studio, Insomniac has come back from many disasters (the aforementioned *Fuse* and its first game, *Disruptor*, for example) and has remained deservedly popular.

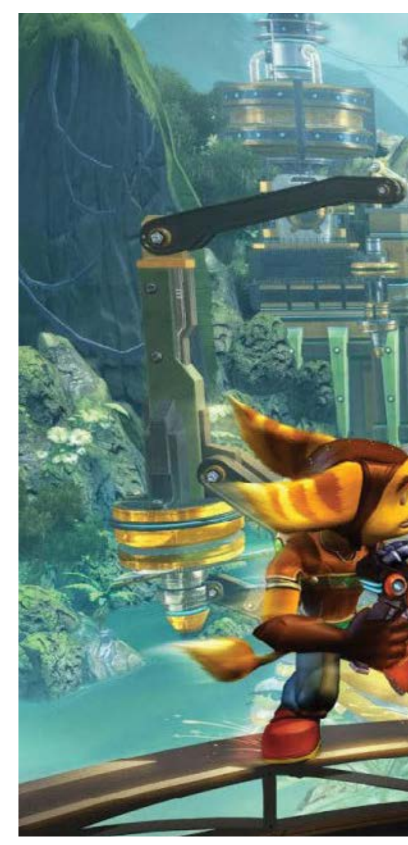
Developer History

Spyro The Dragon **1996 [PSOne]**
Ratchet & Clank **2002 [PS2]**
Resistance: Fall of Man **2006 [PS3]**
Sunset Overdrive **2014 [Xbox One]**

High Point

The original *Spyro The Dragon* proved that *Crash Bandicoot* wasn't the only colourful action platformer needed on Sony's fledgling console.





Left: This is one of the bosses that's been completely reworked since the game's original launch… and it looks a *damn* sight better for it. Below: It certainly looks like there will be film-level cutscenes in the game that'll glue the levels together. Makes sense when you consider the film and game's simultaneous launch.



UP YOUR ARSENAL

RATCHET & CLANK games pride themselves on the ludicrous weaponry you can collect, and the remake is doubling down on that gameplay trope…



MR. ZURKON

A 'synthenoid' that you can summon as a battle companion, this weapon was first introduced in *Tools Of Destruction* and became a fan favourite after players were subjected to his ceaseless puns and sadistic sense of humour. He's not even that effective, he's just evil. We love him.



GROOVITRON

The Groovitron is a floating disco ball of destruction that was introduced in *A Crack In Time*. It plays music that makes any enemy within its AOE dance uncontrollably… sounds innocuous enough, but this could make the hardest parts of the game a cakewalk.



THE PIXELIZER

A shotgun-type armament that turns enemies into 8-bit versions of themselves, making them more susceptible to damage and negative status effects. Insomniac has stated that making each enemy able to pixelate was one of the hardest tasks in the games development.



There are new mini-bosses and main bosses that have been added to the game, too – this, um, *thing* is one of them.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
Windows, OS X, Linux, PS4, Xbox One, Wii U
Origin:
UK
Publisher:
Double Fine
Developer:
Boneloaf
Release:
2016
Players:
1-8 (1-4 on PS4)

Developer Profile

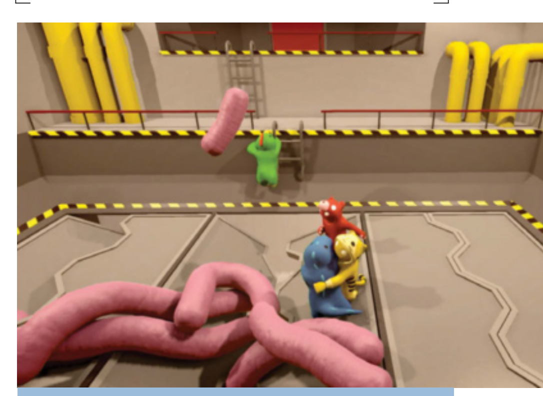
Boneloaf was formed in 2011 by three brothers, James, Jonathan and Michael Brown, none of whom had worked directly in the games industry before. While Michael had studied games design, Jonathan worked in retail and James was lecturing part-time. They were inspired to start making *Gang Beasts* in 2013 after taking part in a series of game jams.

High Point

Boneloaf's endeavours began attracting crowds at gaming shows which brought them to the attention of Double Fine. The team has grown to include Jason and Jemma Pugh, Matt Thomas, Adam Drucker and Robert Larder.



■ Left: The story will have political echoes of Oddworld, revolving around the evil Meat Company. Here, a battle rages on shipping containers in the docks, which will feature in forthcoming versions.





Gang Beasts

CONCEPT ■ Set amid some very hazardous environments, *Gang Beasts* is a retro-inspired multiplayer beat-em-up involving colourful, gelatinous characters that move like they've had a few beers

It's a big scrap – with jelly babies

The first thing we hear is laughter; the first sight is players that are struggling to put the controller down and walk away. *Gang Beasts* may still be in an Early Access public form but when it has been showcased at gaming events, it has proved more than capable of turning heads.

Then again, there is no doubt that controlling slovenly, lurching, jelly-like creatures hell-bent on throwing each other off gondolas or into the jaws of mechanical machinery has something of a general appeal.

Boneloaf wants to recreate the likes of *Double Dragon*, *Crime Fighters* and *Final Fight* – the games that the team played extensively in arcades. To do that, it has been making the game back-to-front. As it stands, there is no connecting story between the 16 playable stages in the Unity 5 Steam build, ranging from a straight-forward wrestling ring to a neglected ferris wheel and an underground railway station complete with hurtling trains. Each of them can be chosen from a menu, allowing up to eight players to compete in a local multiplayer. The final game will introduce a solid narrative structure to hang them on.

"We are working on integrating the levels into a more coherent single player and co-operative multiplayer story mode," affirms James Brown. "We've asked, how do you go from battling on ice to the top of a cooling tower to a shipping container? How does it hook up? We're adopting mechanics that reference *Double Dragon* and *Streets Of Rage* and we've had to do a lot of lateral thinking."

■ Below: There are some very inventive scenarios within the game that lends itself to some very visual environment such as at the top of a cooling tower.



"Gasp with shock and delight at the spectacle of stupid pugnacious thugs punching, kicking, and throwing their foes"
GANG BEASTS WEBSITE

Currently, the range of moves at a player's disposal can be difficult to grasp – many players grab an opponent, try to throw them but end up dropping them instead, for example. Brown talks of adding a tutorial at the start, which will certainly help players.

While it is still early days, the game is looking very promising. It can already enthral players, but Brown says: "We're looking to make the core as fun as possible and we are looking to make it more intuitive to move around the environments."

The team is prototyping an additional race mode. "It's terrible in the current format," admits Brown – and there is also going to be a basic Capture The Flag, "but with dumpsters, phone boxes or skips rather than flags". Work has begun preparing level editors and some character customisation has been outsourced.

There will also be a new run mechanic that allows for a short dash, giving players better leverage for a longer jump. Again, it draws on older games: "The characters are able to hang on to ledges and pull themselves back up in the style of *Prince Of Persia* or *Flashback*," says Brown. For all that, though, this is a game for the future – and we're certain it won't be Boneloaf's last.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

COBALT

Format: **PC, Xbox One, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Mojang**
Developer: **Oxeye Game Studio**
ETA: **February 2016**



TRUTH BE told, we are starting to feel a little sorry for *Cobalt*. Perhaps Oxeye Game Studio thought that having Mojang attached would help push this action-oriented side-scrolling game out a little faster, but in spite of that it's now subject to another delay. Although it had a strong showing at the likes of Gamescom, you won't be doing battle with your buddies until February 2016 – we can only hope the final product lives up to the three-year wait.

2DARK

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **GloomyWood**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



FREDERICK RAYNAL: it may not be a name you are familiar with, but the French developer helped to define the horror genre when he directed *Alone In The Dark* in 1992, and now he is returning once more to the depths. *2Dark* is a top-down stealth game in which you infiltrate and investigate the lairs of serial killers. You'll be tasked with tracking them through dank basements and gloomy hallways, using sound to navigate the darkness.

SHALLOW SPACE

Format: **PC, Mac, Linux**
Publisher: **Special Circumstances**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2017**



SHALLOW SPACE has just entered into Steam Early Access, and from its strong beginnings, it might just have a chance of making a dent in the hull of the ever-burgeoning 'lost in space' scene. With the likes of *EVE Online* and *Nexus: The Jupiter Incident* still floating around it can be tough to see the appeal of any other space simulations, though *Shallow Space* is impressing with its reactive AI and vast customisation options.

ELITE DANGEROUS: HORIZONS

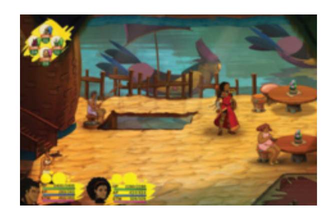
Format: **PC, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Frontier Developments**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q4 2015**



IF YOU were still searching for proof that David Braben and the folks over at Frontier Developments were insane, you should look no further than *Elite Dangerous: Horizons*. As if creating one of the most expansive and visually stunning space exploration games wasn't enough, *Horizons* will finally let players touch down on a planet's surface and explore it in real time from the seat of a buggy – or surface recon vehicle. It looks incredible.

AURION: LEGACY OF THE KORI-ODAN

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Plug In Digital**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC**



AS WITH *Never Alone*, it's always fantastic to see more video games teaching about unfamiliar cultures. *Aurion: Legacy Of The Kori-Odan* is an African-fantasy action-RPG, and it looks as good as it plays. In fact, that's partly because it plays a lot like Namco's *Tales* series, offering frenetic and creative combat across gorgeous, sun-soaked 2D environments. *Aurion* deserves all the attention it's getting.

ASHES OF THE SINGULARITY

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Stardock Entertainment**
Developer: **Oxide Games**
ETA: **Q1 2016**



DO YOU have a laser-shaped hole in your heart waiting to be filled in by some sort of *Supreme Commander* sequel? Bad news for you, folks, that probably isn't happening any time soon. Thankfully, *Ashes Of The Singularity* is doing a stellar job of filling in as a spiritual sequel. This is an RTS that delights in pumping an inordinate amount of robotic machines of war onto your screen, and piles on the pressure while you click away to victory.

DOOM

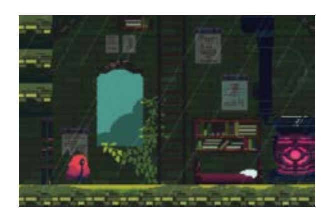
Format: **PC, Xbox One, PS4**
Publisher: **Bethesda Softworks**
Developer: **id Software**
ETA: **2016**



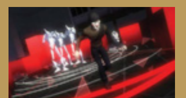
IN SPITE of a fairly damning NDA, some adventurous (or foolish) *Doom* players that lucked into the alpha saw fit to record their time and release onto the internet. Sure, it got pulled, but we've seen it, and are mightily impressed by id Software's offering, even without John Carmack behind the wheel. It's fast, violent and when it comes down to it, looking like a twitchy deathmatch hybrid of *Quake III* and *Call Of Duty*.

DOKO ROKO

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Okobu Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2017**

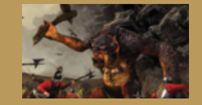


IT'S RARE that a Kickstarter game truly leaves us with our jaws on the floor anymore, but that's the only conceivable reaction to seeing *Doko Roko* in action. It's a 2D rogue-like, with an emphasis on vertical action and lightning-fast combat. But what really grabbed us is the visual presentation: it's beautiful. It's channelling a *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery* meets *Dark Souls* vibe to its visual aesthetic and level design.



ANNOUNCED – Volume: Coda

An expansion for Mike Bithell's PS4 stealth hit *Volume* will be coming to PlayStation VR in 2016, taking full advantage of the system's virtual reality kit as it begins to make its case for a place in your living room.



DELAYED – Total War: Warhammer

While we expected to see *Total War: Warhammer* land before the end of the year, it's now had a date set for April 2016. That's not so bad, though, as what we've seen has been impressive and it deserves more attention.

DAY OF THE TENTACLE REMASTERED

Format: PS4, PC, PS-Vita
Publisher: Double Fine
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q1 2016



THERE'S ALWAYS a hint of hesitation in the air when a studio announces it is dragging a beloved classic out of the ground and giving it a fresh coat of HD paint. It's been over 20 years since LucasArts' classic *Day Of The Tentacle* was released, and we've been cautiously waiting to see how the restoration would fare. Thankfully, it's in safe hands, it seems, with Double Fine, as the new hand-drawn artwork looks incredibly true to form.

FINAL FANTASY XV

Format: PS4, Xbox One
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



IF YOU'VE been paying any attention at all to *Final Fantasy XV*, you'll no doubt be aware that it has come under fire for its characters looking like they are about to hit the stage as a J-Pop band, not, you know, to save the world. But don't despair, apparently the all-black costumes are because "the clothing worn by the four main characters is the official battle gear of the Kingdom of Lucis," or so says game director Hajime Tabata, anyway.

EVERSPACE

Format: PC, Xbox One
Publisher: Rockfish Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



ROCKFISH GAMES – the folks responsible for *Galaxy On Fire* – is bringing its latest game straight to Xbox One in 2016 via ID@Xbox after a hugely successful Kickstarter campaign. *Everspace* is yet another game set in space, but it takes a different approach. Instead of doubling down on the simulation, *Everspace* is putting more emphasis on its rogue-like design and shooter mechanics, all framed inside a tightly built galaxy, fraught with danger.

MEMORANDA

Format: PC
Publisher: Bit Byterz
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



INSPIRED BY the works of Japanese author and master of surrealism Haruki Murakami, *Memoranda* is a highly stylised 2D point-and-click adventure centred around a protagonist who's forgotten her name. While the game – which currently contains over 40 scenes from three years of work – begins with the lead losing her memory, she soon discovers that plenty else is slipping away from around her. An interesting take on a well-worked concept.

THE FORGETTABLE DUNGEON

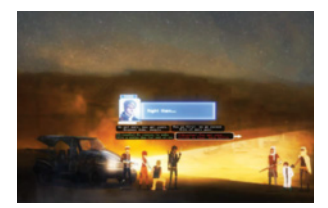
Format: PC
Publisher: Happy Box Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: April 2016



IT'S DIFFICULT for a dungeon crawler to stand out these days, particularly in the indie scene, so we look for interesting combinations of old concepts to get excited over. *The Forgettable Dungeon* ticks that box, as it offers online and offline co-op through procedurally generated dungeons; fully customisable characters; custom dungeon skin sets and randomised items to hunt in highly interactive environments.

WANDERER

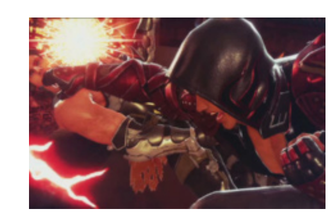
Format: PC
Publisher: Red Cloak Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



THERE'S SOMETHING truly engaging about a lo-fi, sci-fi universe – it's so close to home, yet so alien, and that's what makes Red Cloak Games' new 2D adventure so appealing. *Wanderer* is a cinematic platformer at heart, a modern take on genre classics like *Another World* and *Heart Of Darkness*, with JRPG-style, turn-based combat thrown in for good measure. Beautiful graphical style, with interesting world design.

TEKKEN 7

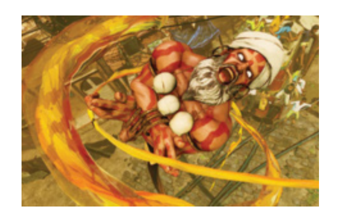
Format: PS4
Publisher: Bandai Namco Entertainment
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



FOR A while, it looked like *Tekken 7* would be sticking to Japanese arcade cabinets, though Bandai Namco has finally confirmed that The King Of The Iron Fist Tournament will indeed be making its way overseas. The brawler will be released for PS4 and though there's been no official mention of it appearing on Xbox One, the publisher was willing to confirm that it was indeed coming to "home systems."

STREET FIGHTER V

Format: PS4
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
ETA: 16 February 2016



ONE OF PlayStation 4's biggest exclusives has finally been given a release date of February 2016. Sony's slate of titles is looking increasingly strong for the new year, and *Street Fighter V* will bolster that exclusive PS4 line-up. Long-limbed legacy fighter Dhalsim will be joining the roster at launch, with Capcom also revealing that six more characters are due to release later in 2016.

Off The Beaten Track.

Gripping character arcs, revolutionary stories, intimate relationships and industry-leading gameplay... Naughty Dog has perfected all this in single-player, but where exactly does that leave Uncharted 4's multiplayer efforts?

Naughty Dog is a studio invested in the human side of videogames: the human stories, the human animations, the human reactions, the human empathy. It revels in grand drama, Hollywood-inspired characters and narrative arcs that take you on an emotional journey as varied and intense as the physical voyages its characters embark upon. The multiplayer facets of Naughty Dog's games, therefore, go somewhat unnoticed in the grand scheme of things: rarely are the multiplayer efforts of the studio's games even reviewed, let alone written about in the many essays that come out about its games.

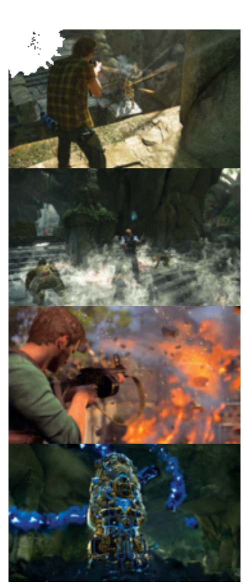
In the years after *The Last Of Us*' release, practically every editorial, forum post or tweet waxing lyrical about great interactive storytelling gave the game an explicit name-check, and academics and enthusiasts alike have gone into great detail about how *The Last Of Us* changed the world. But there's never any conversation about the multiplayer – about the way the player-versus-player part »



ESSENTIAL • EXPLORER'S NOTES

There's an *Uncharted* film coming out 30 June 2017 although it is now looking for its fourth new director for the project

"Naughty Dog has opted to move very far away from the standard Uncharted tone with the multiplayer"



» of the game actually felt relevant to the world Naughty Dog had set out, or about how the very real struggles of fighting for the last scraps of humanity's luxury resources rounded off the single-player narrative with a feeling of desperation and tribalist reversion.

For some time during the PS3/Xbox 360 era of gaming, tacking a perfunctory multiplayer mode onto a game that (to all intents and purposes) was made for its single-player was commonplace: *Dead Space 2*, *BioShock 2*, *Tomb Raider* and *Assassin's Creed Revelations* all suffered from this unfortunate trend, but Naughty Dog always managed to stay on the safe side of functional, entertaining multiplayer.

To that end, the developer has opted to move *very* far away from the standard *Uncharted* tone with the multiplayer for the series' fourth instalment. Where the main, single-player game spins a realistic story about an Indiana Jones-esque explorer and his motley crew of sidekicks and supporters, the multiplayer veers off into something stranger, and much more supernatural.

Sure, the main *Uncharted* games have always toyed with the idea of the supernatural, but it's never been an explicit part of the series' personality (not as much as Hollywood-style gunplay, betrayal and various exploding machines are, at any rate). The multiplayer, it seems, had no choice but to embrace the muted silliness of the franchise – it was the only way Naughty Dog could make it work, the only way the studio could actually make a multiplayer game in that universe *fun*.

To that end, we've got supernatural macguffins coming out of our ears. In the multiplayer – a five-on-five team deathmatch that'll be familiar to anyone that's played a multiplayer shooter in the last decade – you'll power up by discovering the mystical artefacts that have been the focus of past games. These include (but are not limited to) the El Dorado statue and the Cintamani Stone, and depending on which one you re-discover a different battlefield effect will be initiated.

But to discover them you'll need to rack up the points – in the games we played, this gave each match a nice sense of pace: they always start up quite slowly, using base

■ The pace of online play is frantic and makes for some really epic battles once everyone has a sense of the game modes.

ESSENTIAL EXPLORER'S NOTES

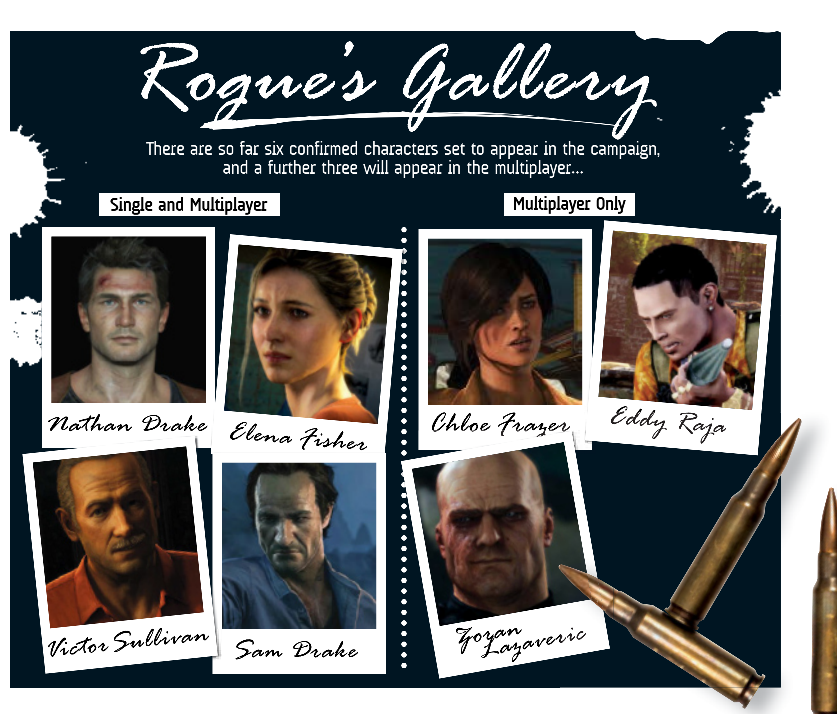
The team developing *Uncharted 4*'s multiplayer was inspired by *Destiny* and Bungie – they've been "playing the game for a long time"

■ Rather than attempting to mimic the tone and pacing of *Uncharted*'s single-player campaign online, this multiplayer is mad-cap and action-packed. It's essentially an entirely different game.

■ All of your favourite treasure hunter heroes and most hated antiquity-hoarding antagonists will be appearing online.

weapons and hunting the opposition, but as you rack up the score you can purchase anything from weapon mods to superpowers (which are accessed via the aforementioned items). It all depends on how you play, really – we know a *lot* of multiplayer games make that claim, but because *Uncharted 4*'s multiplayer facet *embraces* how ridiculous it is, it can really commit to player empowerment with frankly ludicrous power-ups. Robert Cogburn has publicly stated that the multiplayer development team on the game has actively embraced the magic element of the series – explaining that it's something a lot of shooting-based multiplayer games don't take advantage of.

The El Dorado statue, for example, unleashes a flurry of trapped, tormented spirits that seek out enemies hiding behind cover and kill them if they don't get the hell out of dodge. The Cintamani Stone, however, throws its weight behind supporting characters instead – it gives players the ability to instantly heal teammates or speed up the revival of downed allies. By mixing your active role in each match – we played scenarios where other players fell into damage-per-second, support, distraction or lone wolf archetypes – you can really make each round feel unique, and that's before you start bringing the sidekicks into play... »







■ All of the debris and destruction of the campaign can be seen having an effect on the multiplayer. It's cinematic action, but more in the *Fast & Furious* vein.





"Between the sidekicks you can summon in and the supernatural powers you can initiate, you don't have to be good at multiplayer games to start racking up the points"

Drake's arsenal

These are the weapons that have been identified thus far:

Pistols
- Beretta Cougar
- M1911A1
- Beretta 92FS
- Beretta 93R
- S&W Model 629 Classic

Assault Rifles/ Carbines
- SIG SG 556
- AK-47
- IMI Romat
- Ruger AC556

Submachine Guns
- Sa. Vz 61 Skorpion/ Micro Uzi Hybrid

Sniper Rifles
- M24

» *Uncharted* is all about its characters, right? By bringing sidekicks into the fray in multiplayer, Naughty Dog manages to make that character-focused pillar of its single-player development philosophy work in multiplayer. So you won't be playing with the likes of Sully or Drake coming in to be your sidekick, but rather nameless NPCs… thing is, in how they're animated and how their AI personalities work, you'd be forgiven for thinking they were real characters in their own right.

The 'hunter', for example, sets off from a sprint as soon as it spawns. Hopping, leaping, and navigating the multiplayer maps, the hunter will fling itself at the nearest opponent and wrestle them into a paralysing grab leaving them exposed for you to shoot at or beat down. The hunter, then, is best activated at mid-range – you can distract your target as you move in, let the hunter grab your opponent and get some cheap shots in. There's a class known as the 'brute', too, who is basically a carbon copy of *Team Fortress 2*'s heavy – summon him, embed him somewhere vital and he can lay down incredibly intense suppressing fire and can take a *lot* of punishment, too.

If you're more of a long-ranger, though, you can call in the 'sniper' instead. You've got more control of the sniper – you can place it wherever you like (always go high) and have it pick off stragglers or any enemies that try to flee once you've dumped a large amount of damage on them. For trickier players, you can deploy the sniper around blind corners, and have rival fighters fling themselves around and into the firing path, totally unbeknownst to the danger.

For players that like to position themselves in more supportive roles, there's a healer you can recruit as a sidekick, too – put them down on the map and they'll endeavour to patch up anyone that's been wounded… just make sure you're in cover first, otherwise you might just end up getting the healer picked off against your wishes. These healers (known as 'saviours') can also replenish your ammo, so you can keep the firefight going with one of these sidekicks knocking around on the map, ideally prolonging you and your teams' kill-streaks for as long as possible.

For a lot of people picking up *Uncharted*, there's a distinct likelihood that they're not hardcore multiplayer gamers – but Naughty Dog knows this. Between the sidekicks you can summon in and the supernatural powers you can initiate, you don't have to be good at multiplayer games to start racking up the points. On the contrary, you can sit back and let the self-confessed 'good players' do their thing whilst you support from the sidelines, deploying powers and allies.

You can be a good Samaritan, taking advantage of the multiplayer's new 'downed' state and helping real-life friendly players that have been pushed to the brink of death. Like most games and their use of 'downed' status, *Uncharted* aims to break the standard cycle of 'run, die, respawn', rinse and repeat. As the aggressor, you've also get the chance to run up to an enemy and perform pretty sadistic beatdowns on them (ever wanted to kick a guy begging for mercy to death? Well…)

For each of these situations you find yourself in – you could be Drake stomping on someone's head 'til they die, or you could be Chloe summoning a hunter, or you could

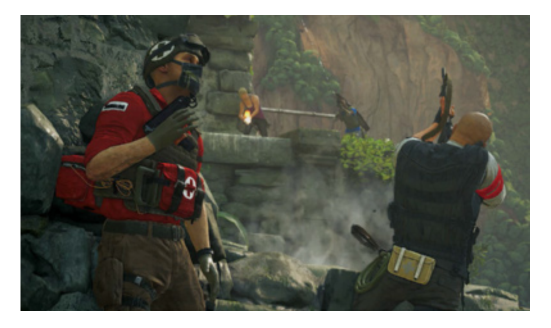
ESSENTIAL • EXPLORER'S • NOTES

Despite the single-player game running at 1080p/30fps, the multiplayer facet of the game runs at 900p/60fps

■ As if the action-leaning gameplay of *Uncharted 4*'s multiplayer wasn't enough ,you can also pick up superpower abilities and cause even more mayhem.

be Elena cracking open a sarcophagus – you'll notice each of the characters will have a unique line of dialogue depending on their contextual situation. Pair that up with the way *Uncharted 4*'s multiplayer seems to mix every game Naughty Dog has worked on in the last 10 years into the mix, too, and you've got a game that's not just an interesting, progressive product in its own right, but also a love-letter to everything *Uncharted* has given us since those very early PS3 days. For fans missing that post-apocalyptic *The Last Of Us* feel, you'll be glad to know at least the in-game store interface is similar...

Uncharted 4's multiplayer facet isn't going to compete with the other third-person multiplayer shooters out there, not really. Instead, by rewarding you pretty well for your assists, revives, kills, and miscellaneous in-battle activities, the *Uncharted 4* multiplayer lets you enjoy an online game your way. It's likely a lot of players won't even bother jumping into this mode (trophy hunters are exempt from that



statement), but it's a fantastic distraction for anyone that feels like they'll be banging their head against the campaign if they get to a point they feel stuck on.

But it's a bonus feature in a game that should help unite that incredibly passionate Naughty Dog fanbase. Help out your teammates, and you'll go far. If you try and make this a one-man show, no-one's really going to have fun... and to Naughty Dog's credit, that perfectly mimics what the single-player portion of the game is about – teamwork, brotherhood, unity and perseverance.

To that end, it's interesting to consider exactly where *Uncharted 4* falls within the game's overall tonal map... on reflection, *Uncharted 3* was a perfect ending for the series, right? It was a satisfying sign-off, with the vast majority of loose ends tied up (the only ones remaining supporting a thread of mystery that we *wanted* to be left to ponder). Character arcs had peaked and descended back into the realms of emphatic; relationships were saved, international crises were averted, the danger was left behind. So... where exactly does *Uncharted 4* step back onto the road?

With an older Drake, a new brother that apparently no-one knew about and *one last job* to complete, where can Naughty Dog take us without re-treading old ground? Are we in danger of seeing *Uncharted* adhere even more to the Indiana Jones formula, and re-enter the fray with a fourth product that exactly no-one is going to want to acknowledge as canon?

Hopefully not. Just because this tale feels like it comes in after an already complete storyline doesn't mean it has nothing to offer – if the studio that brought us *The Last Of Us* knows how to do anything, it's how to make a compelling and interesting narrative arc work within the »

The Story So Far

UNCHARTED: DRAKE'S FORTUNE

■ Supposedly a descendant of famous explorer Sir Francis Drake, Nathan seeks the lost treasure of the fabled El Dorado, taking esteemed journalist Elena Fisher and father-figure Victor 'Sully' Sullivan with him. The trio are harassed by pirates and mercenaries on their journey, thanks to Sully's debt to the latter faction...

UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES

■ Drake travels through Nepal and the Himalayas in search of Shambhala with Elena and Victor, meeting an old partner in crime (Chloe Frazer) and Zoran Lazarevic (a Serbian war criminal) in his quest for the legendary city.



UNCHARTED 3: DRAKE'S DECEPTION

■ Revolving around Drake's relationship with Sully, and the duo's quest to find the Iram of the Pillars in the Arabian Peninsula, *Uncharted 3* goes much more supernatural than its predecessors, introducing the Egyptian god Rameses.



Deciphering Uncharted 4

In the spirit of intrepid treasure hunter Nathan Drake, we pull together the clues, myths and legends that surround Uncharted 4: A Thief's End with a view to uncovering what Drake is doing on the island of Ile Sainte-Marie and what treasure he hopes to find there

B- Columbia (Sam Drake)

■ Just when and where did Drake part ways with his older brother Sam, who will be a companion character (similar to Ellie in *The Last Of Us*) in *Uncharted 4*? The earliest we have got to see Drake is in Columbia as a teenager when he met Victor Sullivan and Katherine Marlowe, but even then there was no mention of a brother. Finding out about Sam Drake and the circumstances in which he and Nathan parted ways is going to be an intriguing part of *Uncharted 4*.



C - Rhode Island (Thomas Tew)

■ The 'Rhode Island Pirate' that's referred to in Drake's notebook is Thomas Tew, a pirate who joined Henry Avery in his attack on the Ganj-i-Sawai, but who was killed during the engagement. Drake's notes suggest that he believes Tew may have actually survived this encounter. We reckon that discovering Tew's true fate will form part of *Uncharted 4*'s story. Interestingly, Tew is alleged to be one of the founders of Île Sainte-Marie's pirate utopia of Libertalia.

D - Greece (The Cryptogram)

■ Puzzles have long been a feature of *Uncharted* and we're expecting solving cryptograms with clues to the locations of buried treasure to be a part of that. The two most likely to appear would be L'Estang's cryptograms, or the one that Levasseur was said to have thrown into the crowd at his execution, alleged to be related to the Greek myth of Hercules and his twelve labours.

E - Nassau (Henry Avery)

■ Henry Avery's last known location was Nassau, where, after escaping the grasp of the authorities, he fades into myth and legend. Speaking of which, one of the legends surrounding Avery is that the chest in which his treasure was kept required three keys, one held by Avery, and two by other captains. A search for three keys sounds like an ideal set up for an *Uncharted* game. Perhaps the other holders of the keys were Olivier Levasseur and Thomas Tew? Perhaps the Flaming Cross of Goa is actually a key? Mysteries abound...

F - Surat, India to Yemen (Ganj-i-Sawai)

■ Another fabled pirate haul was pulled off by a man mentioned in Drake's notes, Henry Avery (also known as Henry Every). Avery raided a ship called the Ganj-i-Sawai – its contents worth between $200 and $400 million in today's money – en route from India to Yemen. A letter discovered by Drake suggests that treasure hunters have been searching for his fortune on Île Sainte-Marie since at least the early 1800s.

A - Mahé (The Pirate Carvings)

■ Carvings discovered on Mahé's Bel Ombre beach in 1923 showing a dog, snake, turtle, horse, fly, two joined hearts, a keyhole, a staring eye, a ballot box, a figure of a young woman, and the head of a man have been interpreted as carvings made by pirates. Guess who it's been claimed owned the land in the early 1700s? Our friend Olivier Levasseur. Given that we know *Uncharted 4* contains a section where Drake discovers a monument with a carving, it wouldn't surprise us if interpreting such pirate carvings is one of the challenges Drake will face.

» confines of a single release. Nolan North – the actor behind Drake – has outlined similar concerns himself; if one of the most famous voice actors in gaming has shown trepidation at walking back into the role (because, in his words, 'there's an awful lot of pressure' on the title) then there's certainly a right to be concerned.

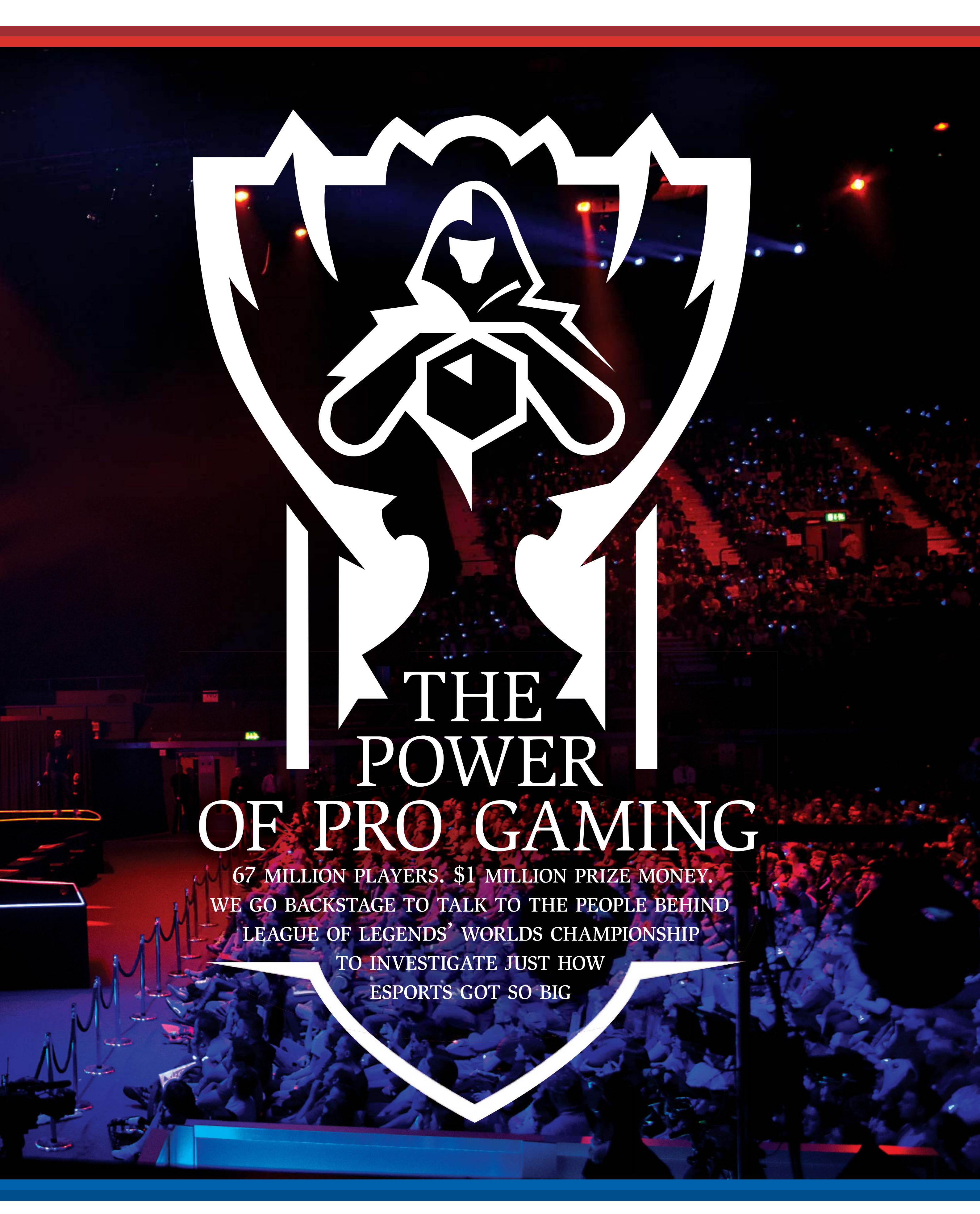
Naughty Dog is aware of this, though, and its approach is to make the games setpieces both bigger *and* smaller. That might take some explaining – *Uncharted* has always revolved around those huge action sequences that give Hollywood action scenes a run for their money, right? Well, in the past, Naughty Dog's natural reaction has been to make those scenes bigger and bigger – if we're talking movies here, you could trace it back to a bigger budget: more things blow up, the stunts are more impressive, the stakes get higher and higher. But, in the fourth instalment, the studio (particularly Naughty Dog creative director Neil Druckmann and writer Jason Schurr) wanted to make keep the action flowing but bring us closer to it, putting the lens closer to the characters' faces.

The Last Of Us told the stories of its characters in small, intimate moments – the way Ellie clung to Joel, the way the two of them interacted, the way every death, every threat, every encounter had its own weight within this oppressive too-close-to-home universe. Naughty Dog are taking these moments and putting them wholesale into *Uncharted 4* – you've got a section where Drake's walking around injured, or the AI is telling Sully to get behind Drake because he's the only one who's armed or something... that's still a setpiece, but Naughty Dog has learned to focus on the micro moments now, adding a very human experience to an otherwise cartoonish action game.

That isn't to say the setpieces wont be there, though – in fact, Druckmann has promised to have the *biggest* setpieces from any *Uncharted* title in this chapter – but they're going to be complemented by these other, smaller moments. The way the studio sees it is that when there's no threat of death – when Drake might not plummet to his death at any minute – you can still learn about his arc, where he is in his story, who he is by the interactions he has with those around him. Of course, when you've got settings as varied and exotic as utopian pirate coves, industrialised urban settlements, jungle islands and iced-over peaks, there's going to be plenty to explore between Drake and his newly revealed (and slightly dodgy) brother Sam.

The game is definitely looking to be a worthy contender to the other entries in the series (we could never say that about the fourth Indiana Jones) and its over-arching quest – the hunt for the pirate treasure of Captain Henry Avery – is likely just a chassis for something a lot more soul-searching and deep. Supported by a multiplayer mode that really wants to celebrate the legacy of *Uncharted*, and developed by a studio that's miles ahead of the competition when it comes to interactive, cinematic storytelling, it's safe to say that *Uncharted 4* might just be the best game in the series so far.


2015 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP - QUARTERFINALS
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THE POWER OF PRO GAMING

67 MILLION PLAYERS. $1 MILLION PRIZE MONEY. WE GO BACKSTAGE TO TALK TO THE PEOPLE BEHIND LEAGUE OF LEGENDS' WORLDS CHAMPIONSHIP TO INVESTIGATE JUST HOW ESPORTS GOT SO BIG

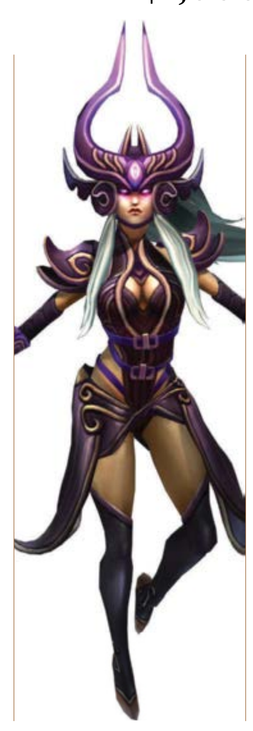
Backstage at Wembley, Jason Yeh – head of eSports for Riot Games in Europe – explains the intricacies of developing a game that has to appeal to a casual and professional audience.

"Championships like these are prestigious, sure, but a League player of this status can expect to earn up to $1,000 a day by streaming"

We're at the Wembley SSE Arena. It's almost 5pm and the air is buzzing with chatter. 12,000 people pack the stands – from front row seats to full rows up in the rafters, the event is sold out. The audience flashes red and blue – wristbands and balloons and signs and all sorts of other gadgetry are loaded with LEDs, and everywhere you look you can see the words "League Of Legends". It's on banners, it's on merchandise, it's on clothing, it's on stage.

The stage – illuminated with an array of lights that'd make the FA Cup Final's lightshow look paltry, the competitive area looks like something straight out of an Eighties sci-fi flick: two rows of computer setups, each with branded and sponsored equipment, sit empty, waiting for the athletes to take their place. There are cameras in these pods, and when the competitors finally arrive, a live feed of their faces will be shown on the front of their pods.

We're here for the Quarter Finals – the beginning of the final stages in the 'Worlds' tournament that will net the winners a cool *one million* dollars in prize money. The second place team will receive $250,000, but if there's one thing we've learned from being here so far, it's that money isn't the motivating factor here, not really… It's the Summoner's Cup that's at stake, which represents the pride and the prestige of being world champion at *League of*



Legends, world champion in a game that over 67 million people across the world play, world champion in a sport who's audience is rapidly catching up with football, NFL, tennis and golf viewerships.

The crowd goes quiet – something has started to happen. A shoutcaster employed by Riot Games (*League*'s developer) begins to introduce the players to the stage. We're about to watch a showdown between the SK Telecom team and Ahq eSports Club for a place in the semis. SK Telecom is aiming to reclaim its 2013 world title after losing out last year, and it has a pretty diabolical weapon on its side: Faker. Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok, known to Korean Leaguers as "The Demon King" because of his dominance, is widely regarded as one of the greatest summoners of all time. The crowd goes *crazy*, chanting, "Faker, Faker, Faker!" The player in question smiles politely and sits down alongside his teammates.

Ahq eSports Club takes to the stage – very much the underdogs of this pairing, the Taiwanese players have been battling for the world championship since 2010 and have been beaten to the post every time. Though they might not get to take the trophy home, many of these players – the vast majority of whom are in their early twenties – will still likely be millionaires by the time they're 25. Championships like these are prestigious, sure, but a *League* player of this status can expect to earn up to $1,000 *a day* by streaming through

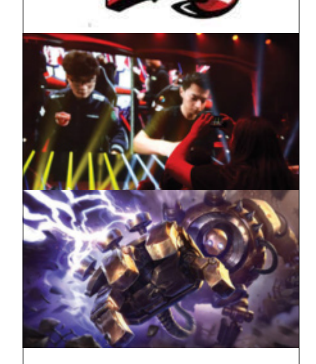


The presentation of the quarter finals we attended rivals that of a traditional sports match - over 12,000 people filled the seats and professional commentators narrated the whole event

partnerships with their sponsors, Twitch and Riot. Think about that in terms of 'traditional' athletes – footballers, tennis players and golfers don't make that kind of money from solo play. It's insane.

But here, at Worlds, none of that matters – when you're sitting in front of an audience of 12,000 people, being streamed live to BBC3 (with millions more *League* enthusiasts watching via the Internet at home and abroad), the pressure is *on*. There are people in this audience here to see *you*, here to see how *you* play. We overheard one guy in the crowd say to his friend, "You know, I'll never be as good as Faker, I'll never play like him – I can't believe he's like ten metres away!" These athletes are idolised like the highest-grossing sports stars. They are gaming idols – they're celebrities.

"I remember going to my first baseball game. I wanted to see that one player whose baseball card I had. I loved following him in the newspapers, reading the scores, and being around other people who loved that as well was just a really memorable experience for me as a kid," explains Jason Yeh, EU head of eSports at Riot Games when we grab him backstage at the Wembley Arena. "I'm a sports fan and I've been to a lot [of events]. I think it's unique because you go to, like, a basketball game or an American football game, and people love the teams and they love individual players but they don't feel a strong connection with the game itself. Most people don't play American football, they don't play basketball, whereas almost everybody here plays a *lot* of *League*. On top of being a fan, they love the game."



The tension in the arena was palpable as the teams sat down to play.

With a player base that draws in 13 million players a day and has in excess of 67 million active accounts, that makes sense. *League* – which is free to play – pulls crowds from all over the world. It can run on most PCs with an Internet connection and can be learned in less than a day. But it's also infamously *tricky* – there's an incredibly deep meta-game that the guys on-stage have dedicated their lives to learning. The players – their audience – understand this, and it fuels a kind of adoration.

"In Korea, and [in] some cases in China, the best players of *League Of Legends* and other games are just as popular as the pop singers and entertainment idols," explains Yeh. "We have fans here from China, Korea, Taiwan, the US, planning their vacations around Worlds. I think it's awesome to see!" Whereas 'traditional' athletes are surrounded by this veil of mystique, eSports pros are on Reddit, they're on Twitter, they're on forums. They're accessible, all day every day, whether you're in Seoul or London or Taipei, and that's part of the appeal for fans.

"Just like how I'm a hardcore Liverpool fan – and there's now a glimmer of hope for the team now we have Klopp – the audience and the *League* players follow their teams throughout the year, and then they hope that their team can qualify to represent their region at Worlds – whether that's European, Chinese, American, Korean or anything else. Coming from, like, a traditional sports perspective, I think it's the fact that [*League*] is a team game, it is a game where the sum of the parts are greater than any individual. So there are fans for individual players like Faker in SKT [SK Telecom T1], but people do become fans of teams, too. I think that that element of *this* team versus *that* team, and the different roles each individual player has – their different playstyles and all the different Champion diversity – really helps capture the fans' imaginations, too. Even though the rule set and the map is the same, every game is completely different, even if you have the same two teams playing. I think that makes it exciting."

Thanks to modern tech – the ability to stream and create extra cameras in-game for spectators to view the game through – eSports is spreading into every corner of the world. For over a decade, South Korea and China has been a hotbed of eSports culture, with the West growing its audiences slightly slower. But now that events like Worlds are taking place in huge arenas around the world, the scene is getting bigger and bigger. Worlds itself, for example, had an online audience of 1.6 million in 2011. By 2014, that number was up to an incredible 27 million. Data for this year's competition isn't available yet, but everyone we spoke to at Worlds 2015 seemed confident the numbers would be up *again* this year… and that makes sense, because market research is now putting eSports as a whole at a value of £125 million, and some analysts expect »

THE **BEST** LEAGUE OF LEGENDS CHARACTERS

(According to Win Ratio)

VS

		Popularity	Win Rate
1	Malzhar Mid	3.4%	53.8%
2	Lux Mid	10.9%	53.6%
3	Brand Mid, Support	5.3%	53.3%
4	Blitzcrank Support	19.9%	53.3%
5	Veitar Mid	12.4%	53.1%
6	Ahri Mid	12.2%	53.0%
7	Amumu Jungler	6.8%	52.8%
8	Wukong Top, Jungler	5.6%	52.7%
9	Talon Mid	4.1%	52.5%
10	Skarner Jungler	2.4%	52.4%

THE **MOST POPULAR** LEAGUE OF LEGENDS CHARACTERS

(According to Pick Rate)

		Popularity	Win Rate
1	Thresh Support	38.4%	49.8%
2	Vayne Jungler	33.9%	49.8%
3	Lee Sin Jungler	33.7%	48.3%
4	Jinx Jungler	33.4%	52.2%
5	Kindred Jungler	28.3%	49.8%
6	Yasuo Mid, Top	24.4%	50.6%
7	Riven Top	22.1%	50.9%
8	Blitzcrank Support	19.9%	53.3%
9	Tristana AD Carry	18.9%	47.9%
10	Caitlyn AD Carry	17.5%	50.4%



GOING PRO

We speak to Lee Jae-wan (more commonly known as 'Wolf') from SK Telecom T1 after his quarter-final victory, regarding pro-play and the life of a professional gamer

How does it feel knowing that there are millions of people watching at home and thousands of people in the arena today?
I think it's a truly heartwarming experience to have this many fans, players, people watch me play and enjoy what I do. It's exciting, it's great!

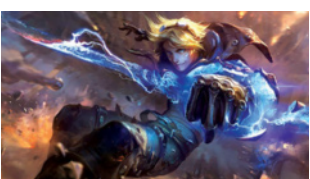
ESports is becoming celebrated almost as much as a physical sport. Do you think it will get even more popular?
This is my personal opinion, but I think it will continue to grow, given the technology and everything that's improving around *League* and this industry. I think it will continue to grow and, perhaps, someday may even be an Olympic event. Who knows? [laughs]

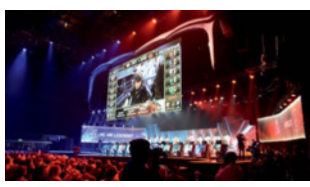
Do you get nervous before you play?
So, I didn't get nervous before today's game. Sometimes I get nervous when I don't perform well, but my form's been pretty high and I've been playing well, so no nerves before today's game.

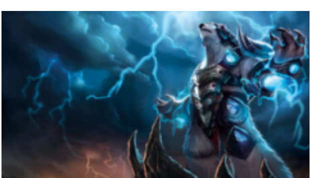
Would you agree that pro gamers are reaching a new kind of celebrity status?
I think some people say that because we are followed, watched and recognised by a decent amount of people. So, in that sense, I think it's a good thing that people are saying that about us.

Did you ever think, before you became a professional, that this would be a path for you and you would end up playing at Wembley stadium?
Absolutely not! Back [before I was pro], I was just a normal student, just a kid who went to school, played videogames at home, thought I would lead a very normal life. Never did I imagine myself playing in front of this many people, with them cheering me on!

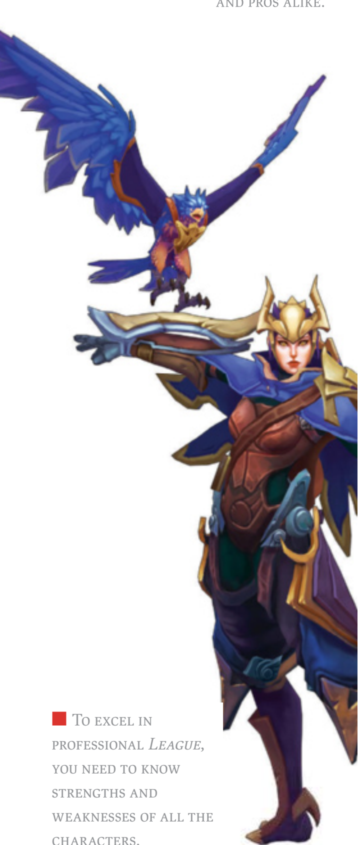








The characters and style of *League Of Legends* are all part of the professional gaming appeal: the simple, bold art is appealing and easy to understand to casual gamer and pros alike.



To excel in professional *League*, you need to know strengths and weaknesses of all the characters.

that number to hit £300 million within the next two years. "I think the reality is that a lot of people play not only *League* but videogames in general" explains Yeh, "and I think for companies like BBC in the UK, cable channel OGN in Korea and other [networks] we work with in Europe and Asia... A lot of these platforms see the audience, the people who are playing games and the people who are playing *League* specifically, overlap a ton with their target demographic, so they're looking at investing."

Investment is a common term in eSports – more and more venture capitalists are starting to back eSports teams: with audiences this massive, you can secure prominent advertising for relatively little investment. UK-based eSports firm Team Dignitas, for example, recently announced it had been offered a bid of £320,000 for one of its teams. The UK has lacked the infrastructure and funding for a *real* eSports scene in recent years, but between that level of investment, more attention on Britain as an eSporting destination and even UK companies getting in on large-scale LAN projects, we could see this incredible scene really take off here over the next few years.

"I think for the BBC they want to see how much engagement they get over the course of this weekend," Yeh told us when we asked how likely it was that eSports could become as popular over here as it has in some Asian markets. "But hopefully companies like the BBC will see the value, whether it's in the broadcast itself or creating features and interviews, creating other content that is relevant to both our player base and audience, and also their own [audience]. I think now more companies are seeing that there is a big overlap between the audience we've been able to build and the people that *they're* going after."

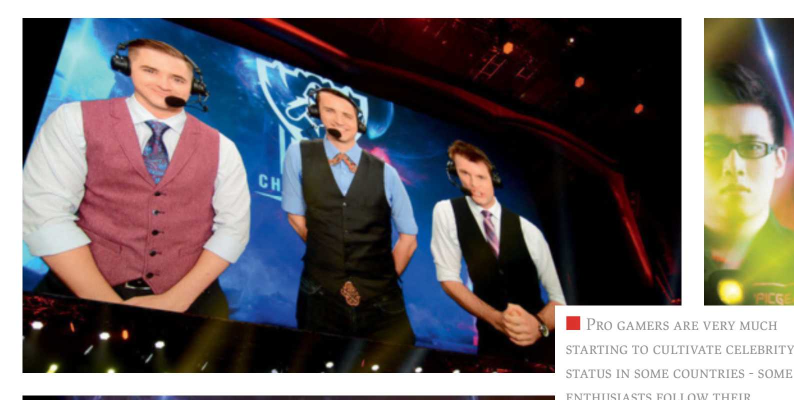
But to talk to an audience, you need to know how to present digestible, understandable information – the Worlds tournament may have been executed like an FA Cup Final, but to the layman, *League* can be an incredibly confusing game, full of jargon, relentless action and some high-level technical play. That's where Shoutcasters (or commentators, to traditionalists) come in.

"I started in the early 2000s with streams of 20 people, then I joined Riot doing *League* when there were only a few hundred viewers," explains David "Phreak" Turley – one of Riot's most famous shoutcasters. "It's weird because it's all grown while I've been a part of it – I've never been thrust into a *big* scene, you know, it's grown like a parabola. It's gotten faster, but it's at least been a slope." As the game has grown, so has the need for people that can clearly and articulately explain to the audience just *what* is going on, but these commentators need to be able to do that not only professionally, but in an entertaining and engaging way – after all, sometimes *League* games at high level can go on for over three hours.

"We really do try to invest in the broadcast component," explains Yeh. "The shoutcasters, the casters... It's similar to sports: there's play-by-play, there's colour commentary. A lot of the colour commentators are former pros so they have a bit more insight into why things happen, why certain Champions are big, what's going to happen late in the game. Having a good play-by-play that can easily explain what's happening to even the most casual of *League* players, I think it's important to have that dynamic."

"I didn't watch a lot of professional sports – well, at least not enough to pick up on what they were saying a lot of the





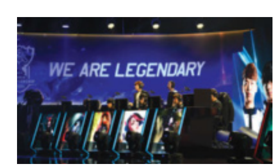


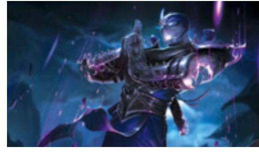
■ Pro gamers are very much starting to cultivate celebrity status in some countries - some enthusiasts follow their favourite players or teams around the world to support them.

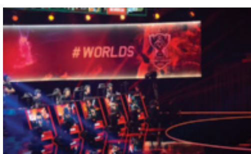


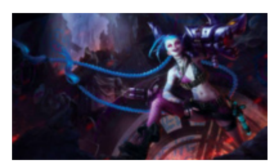


"eSports is very much on the rise: it's growing year on year, the audiences are getting bigger, the sponsors and the companies involved are getting bigger, and the players are getting bigger in their own right too"









■ We're likely to see pro gaming get even more budget powering its events… with more sponsors and mainstream attention, pro gaming is set to only get bigger and more popular.

time," Turley tells us when we ask him how he learned to talk *League*. "I did watch a lot of eSports, though, even back in the day, and one of my favourite personalities of all time is Joe Miller, who's a British guy I took a lot of inspiration from. It's funny because there's a lot of multimedia around gaming and eSports – and that's where another big inspiration of mine was from. You know, you'd start to see people putting together highlight reels and most of the time these are based from the in-game camera, so they're quite boring and stale… but sometimes, when people cut in footage from tournaments and finals, they'll cut in the voices of the Shoutcaster. A lot of my inspiration was taken from these frag reels, sizzle reels – you know, the '360 no scope' stuff – and what people like Joe Miller would say in those. I've modelled a *lot* of what I get excited about on these, so if I think something like 'this is what I want to see in a sizzle reel', I should be able to sell it like that. I make a lot of corny jokes and lame puns, too, so I put a lot of my personality into [my work] too [laughs]."

Turley makes a living from doing this – just before we met him for our interview, he was in a studio overlooking the main Wembley arena, with over 15 cameras on him, presenting to a panel and commentating on the game. It took a crew of over 50 full-time professionals to kit the arena out for Worlds, and over 40,000 people attended over the four-day event. An entire tube station was taken over with *League* banners and logos, and the entire Wembley approach was fitted with adverts featuring one of the 120-plus in-game Champion roster. And those in the know – the guys we spoke to – are convinced that it's only going to get bigger.

"eSports is very much on the rise: it's growing year on year, the audiences are getting bigger, the sponsors and the companies involved are getting bigger, and the players are getting bigger in their own right, too," Turley told us. "Gaming is becoming a *very* big deal. I've been interested in professional eSports since I was a kid and had to rely on my 56k Internet connection, and seeing the leaps and strides and bounds which we've come is insane. I used to watch these things hosted in a ballroom at a hotel, where you have like an audience of 50 people watching people play over their shoulders. Now you've got things like this – we're in a stadium with a real production crew and everything's going on, and that's amazing!"

It *is* amazing – as we conclude our chat with Turley and he returns to his studio with its bird's eye view of all the action, the players return to the stage to resume their showdown. The crowd, we can hear as we make our way through the TV cameras and operations desks, is going crazy. We wait around backstage until the game is over and manage to catch one of the competitors as he comes off-stage (see 'Going Pro' boxout). After that, we make our way to the behind-the-scenes exit. "Get ready for the cheers…" says one of the security guards. We carry on, confused, and as security opens the heavy double-doors, a crowd of eSports fans erupts with applause and cheers. We're leaving from the 'performer's exit' and they've mistaken us for players. For a brief, fleeting second, we understood what it was like to be one of these gaming prodigies – and it felt *amazing*. It reminds us of what Turley told us earlier that evening…

"The sky's the limit, I think, in terms of how far professional gaming can go."







Deus Ex

REDEFINING CYBERPUNK

WE SIT DOWN WITH EIDOS MONTREAL TO FIND OUT HOW MANKIND DIVIDED IS BUILDING ON THE LESSONS OF HUMAN REVOLUTION AND EMBRACING THE DARK AGES

Cyberpunk is about contrasts and *Deus Ex* is a perfect example of this. The past contrasts with the future, technology contrasts with biology, and science contrasts with philosophy. For Eidos Montreal, exploring these contrasts has been a driving force behind its creative vision for *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*. Sitting down with the team ahead of release we found out that those contrasts extend to how they've gone about developing this sequel after its experience taking on the *Deus Ex* brand with *Human Revolution*. Be warned, ahead lie spoilers from that first *Deus Ex* game from the team.

"It's been quite a bit different and quite similar at the same time, as paradoxical as that sounds," says Jonathan Jacques-Belletête, executive art director at Eidos Montreal. "It was different because we finally knew what this IP was for us. There was so much work that went into *Human Revolution* to find out what our voice was and at the same time, obviously, trying to pay tremendous respect to the origins of the franchise and the first *Deus Ex*. But we needed to make our statement and stand out from all the other games and almost create a new genre of cyberpunk somehow."

That might sound a little grandiose, but take a look at the look and feel of *Deus Ex* and while it may bring to mind many classic cyberpunk landscapes and settings, it offers a number of unique styles and choices that are driven by the story this team wanted to tell. It was packed with renaissance imagery right down to the fashion of the era; the Icarus myth was woven into our pursuit of technology; even the colour palette of the game had reason and purpose behind it. It was all good groundwork for this sequel, which is driving *Mankind Divided* down a new and interesting path.



Jonathan Jacques-Belletête drives the art style of *Deus Ex*.

"We sat down and we figured out how much the world had changed and where Mary [DeMarle, executive narrative director at Eidos Montreal] and JF [Jean-Francois Dugas, executive game director at Eidos Montreal] wanted to bring the story, we said, of course, if *HR* was all about the golden age and the enlightenment era of transhumanism, now was the complete opposite," Jacques-Belletête explains. The events of *Human Revolution* saw massive advances in human augmentation through technology, showcased best by protagonist Adam Jensen and the life-saving adaptations to his body. But at the end of the game a incident takes place that leads to millions of »







Eidos Montreal developed a new engine for *Mankind Divided* called the Dawn Engine, feeling that proprietary technology was the only way to realise its unique blend of graphic novel style and realistic sci-fi.



In this new dark age for technology the augmented are highly distrusted and terrorist groups are emerging that are fighting in the name of transhuman rights.

"THE WORLD HAS MADE THIS 180-DEGREE TURN WITH THE AUG INCIDENT… AUGMENTATIONS ARE NOT SEEN AS THE FUTURE OF HUMANKIND ANY MORE"

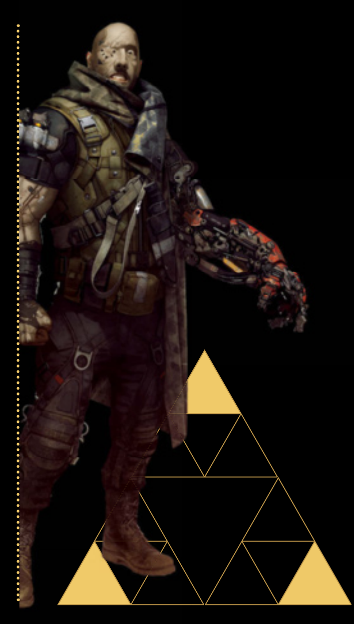
augmented humans dying and many others being injured or killed in the process. What *Mankind Divided* now explores is the very human backlash to that event.

"If we went to the enlightenment era in *HR* and then there was a purposeful choice universally with *Mankind Divided* to go back into the dark ages, to cancel out this new-found knowledge and future," says Jacques-Belletête. "This made us create the corporate feudalism, which is the main visual theme of the game; we're using brutalist architecture. And the brutalist movement was all raw concrete and real brutalist buildings look like fortresses, like the big brutalists of the Sixties and Seventies, they look like a fortress with lots of really stark, harsh angles. That directly contrasts all the flowy things of the cyber renaissance."

And so we're back with this idea of contrasts, exemplified particularly well by some of the new locations you get to explore in *Mankind Divided*, such as Prague. We asked what elements of this city attracted the team to it considering it's not an obvious urban landscape for a cyberpunk story. "We thought that it would be pretty cool to go there and we saw that a lot of the global lens has been shifting towards Europe recently with events in Greece and a bunch of stuff that's happened a bit earlier in the past three to five years," answers Jacques-Belletête. "And also, it's a total medieval city, with the art nouveau as well. And cyberpunk is all about juxtaposition… so we thought mixing cyberpunk with this literally medieval city would really heighten and make crazy juxtapositions."

The Czech capital is a gorgeous city with a mix of gothic and art nouveau architecture and its relationship with more traditional noir storytelling between world wars or in the cold war might also have proved influential. Throwing in the fortresses of a brutalist new worldview is only going to look more otherworldly and shocking in a city like Prague too. Perhaps a more obvious fit was adding Dubai to the *Deus Ex* fiction, a city that is about as close to cyberpunk and themes of corporate influence as we have on the planet today.

"I mean, nobody really knows what's going on there," states Jacques-Belletête. "You can go to a hotel and spend a weekend there. But have you ever seen those pictures online of all those super-crazy cars that have been abandoned, like Lamborghinis? They're covered in sand… it's just completely insane. Some of the richest people go there for a week or



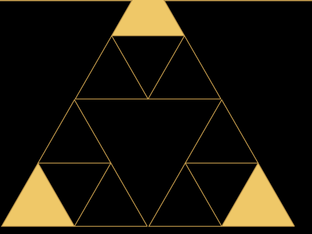
something and they're like 'I'm going to have this Lamborghini while I'm here', and they leave and maybe they think they'll come back, but they don't. It's just the most insane thing ever."

Eidos Montreal has drawn on some of this imagery as the continued expansion of Dubai sees a massive augmented workforce employed and then wiped out by the Aug Incident of *Human Revolution*. "The rest of the world got cleaned up, or at least a big part of the world, after the Aug Incident and the millions and millions who died, but we thought that Dubai, much like with the cars, a lot of the carcasses would be left in a lot of the buildings that have been abandoned, still under construction."

But really all of this is an extension of the ideas and themes that *Human Revolution* began. We wondered, given how Eidos Montreal approach its prequel to the *Deus Ex* universe, almost as if it were a brand new IP, what was the primary focus for the team coming into this sequel?

"What *Human Revolution* lacked tremendously was having a really good technology behind it, having a really good engine, which it didn't," is Jacques-Belletête's refreshingly frank assessment. "This time around it really does, our own proprietary engine, the Dawn engine. So our time was spent really figuring out how to make it look super next-gen without losing this stylisation – this graphic novel look – that became the game's signature. A lot of research went into making sure it still looks like it's homogenous, that it's the same continuity, but it just looks super next-gen. A lot more of it was on the tech side this time around because the world has made this 180 degree turn with the Aug Incident in *Human Revolution* and now augmentations are not seen as the future of humankind anymore, and are even seen as a threat. We needed to find our new metaphors and that's where the corporate feudalism came in and it directly opposes the cyber renaissance and all that kind of stuff."

■ The Dubai setting for *Mankind Divided* will be mostly set during daylight, creating a resort feel for the city, despite the affects of the Aug Incident, compared to the darker Prague and other cities.



Stuck in the middle once again is Adam Jensen, the former police officer-turned head of security for Sarif Industries whose mysterious past and a near-fatal incident made him the test subject for a new wave of human augmentation through technology. While his back-story and famous refrain of "I never asked for this," make him a compelling hero and a worthy successor (or should that be predecessor?) to the original *Deus Ex*'s JC Denton, we wondered if it was set in stone he would lead *Mankind Divided* too?

"Nope. Mary wanted to kill him," reveals Jacques-Belletête, much to our surprise. "And I was like 'Noooo!'. It's very funny. Me and Mary play around with that all the time. We play like it's almost a friction between us all the time, when it really isn't. It's just like funny banter that we have in the office. I was like,'Are you crazy? It's so hard to create an iconic hero'. It always happens by fluke and it happened with Adam Jensen and we need to continue. But that's how it works when you start designing a new game. The directors all sit down and we pitch where we think it should go. We discuss it and we talk about it. But yeah, lots of funny jokes came out of the fact that Mary wanted to get rid of Adam. She's a writer and that's how writers are. And I know where she's coming from. She was like, 'I've said everything I had to say about Adam'. And that's how writers are. So no, it was not always a given. But we saved him."

Jensen now finds himself as a key member of an Interpol anti-terrorist intelligence and response team called Task Force 29 (that has a bit of a *Ghost In The Shell, Section 9* feel about it, which we like). His primary interest however remains hunting down the Illuminati and uncovering the darker machinations that are influencing »



Deus Lexicon

The important concepts you need to know going into this game

Cyberpunk A subgenre of science fiction focusing on technology and issues of artificial intelligence, cybernetics and the integration of technology with human physiology. The setting is typically dystopian, involving megacorporations.

Illuminati Often a generic term used to reference shadowy and secretive organisations of leading political and/or business figures who control world events and interests without public knowledge or consent.

Knights Templar An association of knights from the Middle Ages, the Knights Templar are regularly used in fiction to portray a long-standing group of powerful, wealthy and influential people driven by a common ideology. Often associated with religious artefacts.

Nanotechnology A form of tech able to manipulate matter at an atomic, molecular or supramolecular scale. Nanotechnology often forms the base for concepts of cybernetics and the integration of technology with biological forms.

Brain-computer interface A line of direct communication between a brain and an external device, often a computer. Frequently used to enhance or support the natural abilities and capacity of the brain.

Group Mind A sci-fi term for the concept of a collective consciousness, sometimes referred to as a gestalt intelligence or hive mind. Often involving telepathy or technological connection it is a common tool to highlight the differences between conformism and individuality.

Prosthesis A device used to replace a missing body part in medicine. Prostheses have been used to help individuals adapt to, accept or get over the trauma of the loss of limbs dating back at least as far as 1500 BC.

Transhumanism An intellectual movement that believes that the next stages of human evolution will be achieved through technology and humanity taking charge of its own advancement.

Daedalus A figure from Greek myth, a craftsman and artist. He is the creator of his son Icarus' wings and the story is often used as a metaphor for myopic human arrogance.

Icarus The son of Daedalus, he builds with his father a set of wings from wax and feathers in an attempt to escape Crete, but in flying too close to the sun (against the advice of his father) the wings melt and he falls into the sea.

Adam Jensen: The upgraded man

Here are some of the new toys you get to play with in Mankind Divided's arsenal

Remote Hacking
Allows Jensen to hack into systems without having to be standing right next to them. Allows for a better integration of hacking with stealth gameplay.

Weapon HUD
A new weapon upgrading system allows Jensen to breakdown elements of his weaponry that can be customised in a modular fashion.

Nanoblade
An upgraded blade concealed in Jensen's arm can now be detached and fired at hostiles in combat as well as used as a more traditional melee weapon.

Titan shield
A new protective system that covers Jensen in a geometric shell that protects him from incoming projectiles. It apparently took a year for Eidos Montreal to perfect.

Tesla
A gun arm upgrade with two firing modes. The first can target up to four hostiles and uses a non-lethal charge, like a taser. The second is a concussive electronic blast.

Icarus Dash
Allows Jensen to move in a single direction horizontally or vertically, seemingly warping from one spot to another. Useful for outmanoeuvring enemies.

» events in the world. Once again Elias Toufexis is voicing Jensen with his unique and instantly recognisable gravelly tones. But Jacques-Belletête can't say too much about how Jensen's abilities are introduced to us this time around. "I can tell you that he starts more souped-up than in the previous game, but then something happens," he teases.

One thing we wanted to get into with Eidos Montreal however was the challenge of making a hero in game within a genre that typically doesn't have the protagonist win, at least not in a traditional 'hero's journey' sense. Cyberpunk, influenced by its noir roots, has a bleaker outlook. It's an idea that intrigues the Eidos Montreal executive art director "The question, I guess, is does he win? But I know what you mean: there are different levels. In the story that we're writing, does he actually win?"

"These games don't end with happy endings but with choices that are as good as they are bad," laughs Jean-Francois Dugas, executive game director. "So, it becomes a question of letting the players express their own perspective letting them feel like they made the right choices for them while making them accept that every action has consequences."

It brought to mind a comment Jacques-Belletête had seen on a recent *Mankind Divided* trailer about the place of these games in the *Deus Ex* continuity. "This was a comment from a fan, they said, 'I'm so sad to know that Adam Jensen in the end will never succeed', because they said that this is a prequel, we know what happens in 2052, so we know that Adam will not really dent the Illuminati because of all the shit that will happen in 2072. I thought that was so interesting when I read that, and again I'm not saying that this is how we're taking it or not, but I can see where they're coming from. So, as I said, can you really win when you're fighting such an evil?"

The ending of *Human Revolution* touched on this subject with its rather horrific conclusion that saw Jensen claim some sort



Art director Jonathan Jacques-Belletête and game director Jean-Francois Dugas have talked about meeting up in 2027 and playing their game to see how much they managed to predict for the future.

"CAN YOU REALLY WIN WHEN YOU'RE FIGHTING SUCH AN EVIL?"

of small victory, but in the midst of a rather large catastrophe for humanity. It would ultimately end with a rather binary choice for Jensen, but that's something this team is working to remedy as it seeks to make your choices matter more in *Mankind Divided*. "I think it has a lot to do with our ability to make you care about the world you explore, about the characters you meet and the themes we make you explore," Dugas offers. "If you don't care about these things, no matter what the choice is, you won't care about it. But if we succeed to engage you in them, even the smaller choice can impact you. Also, it is important to me that we keep choices in the grey zone. Nothing is totally good nor bad. Trying to keep them in a zone where it becomes a matter of perspectives makes for interesting dilemmas."

The Eidos Montreal team itself is split on issues of transhumanism and augmentation, but apparently most of those in favour are also those with lots of tattoos and piercings.

Not wanting to reveal too much about *Mankind Divided*'s plot just yet, Jacques-Belletête offers us this example from the previous game. "For instance, the whole Faridah Malik situation, the pilot in *Human Revolution*; so many people made so much effort to save her in that scene when the chopper crashes and it's really, *really* hard to save her. They would reload and reload and they would spend three hours saving her and they have no idea that if you don't save her, in the harvester's hideout you're actually going to find her all bloodied on the operating table and she's been harvested of her piloting augmentations. There's no reward gameplay-wise to seeing that, but my example is that often the choices are so opaque that you're not going to know what you're going to miss and sometimes what you miss isn't going to give you any bonuses or anything. It just gives you tremendous lore or emotions. I think it comes down to that, some choices need to be gameplay related or story related and some choices just need to make you feel as if this world is alive. It's definitely one of the branches that we spend the most energy on."

This time around, those choices will also have a great impact on the game's finale, unlike in the previous game. "We were figuring out how this choice and consequence thing worked in *Human Revolution*. Even though I think in a lot of ways we did it really, really well, the ending was actually one of the ways that we messed up a little bit with the button prompt. You could just reload and try all the other ones. But now there's no such thing. We're tracking some metrics as you play and that will affect your ending. And if you reload you'll get the same ending again because we're using the same metrics. You'll have to play again to get a different ending and change your playstyle or choices."

One element of this amalgam of choice and playstyle recently was the idea that with the four core pillars of action, stealth, hacking and social skills in the game, you might be able to talk your way out of boss battles or even talk a boss to death. It was a fascinating thought, since played down by the Eidos Montreal team, but Jacques-Belletête confirms that confrontation isn't the only solution open to you in the game if you choose to avoid it.

"I'm not going to say how this works exactly, but certainly this time around you can really, really play the game without killing anybody at all, obviously including the bosses. How much it is a mix of talking your way around them, how much it is a »

Although Adam Jensen is part of an anti-terrorist task force that focuses on augmented crimes, he is also working with the Juggernaut Collective, a group of hacktivist hunting down the Illuminati.

Golem City is a nickname for a newly formed augmented ghetto built around Utulek Station, outside of Prague. Undocumented people are sent here, away from the un-augmented population.

"THIS TIME AROUND, YOU CAN PLAY THE GAME WITHOUT KILLING ANYBODY AT ALL, INCLUDING THE BOSSES"

Vote Transhuman!

The transhumanists are running for the real US Presidency! Here's what you need to know

In case you believed that the issues of technology and the advancement of human evolution through self-determined enhancement in *Deus Ex* were pure sci-fi, think again. The transhumanist party in the USA is a real thing and its leader, Zoltan Istvan, is standing for President in the 2016 election. Their platform is to support science in "overcoming human death and aging within 15-20 years." While his chances of winning much support might be slim, not least as a third-party candidate in the US, Istvan hopes to raise issues of science and medicinal research with candidates and to help create a unified voice for transhumanism, not just in North America, but around the world. It's a fascinating story that we recommend you check out.

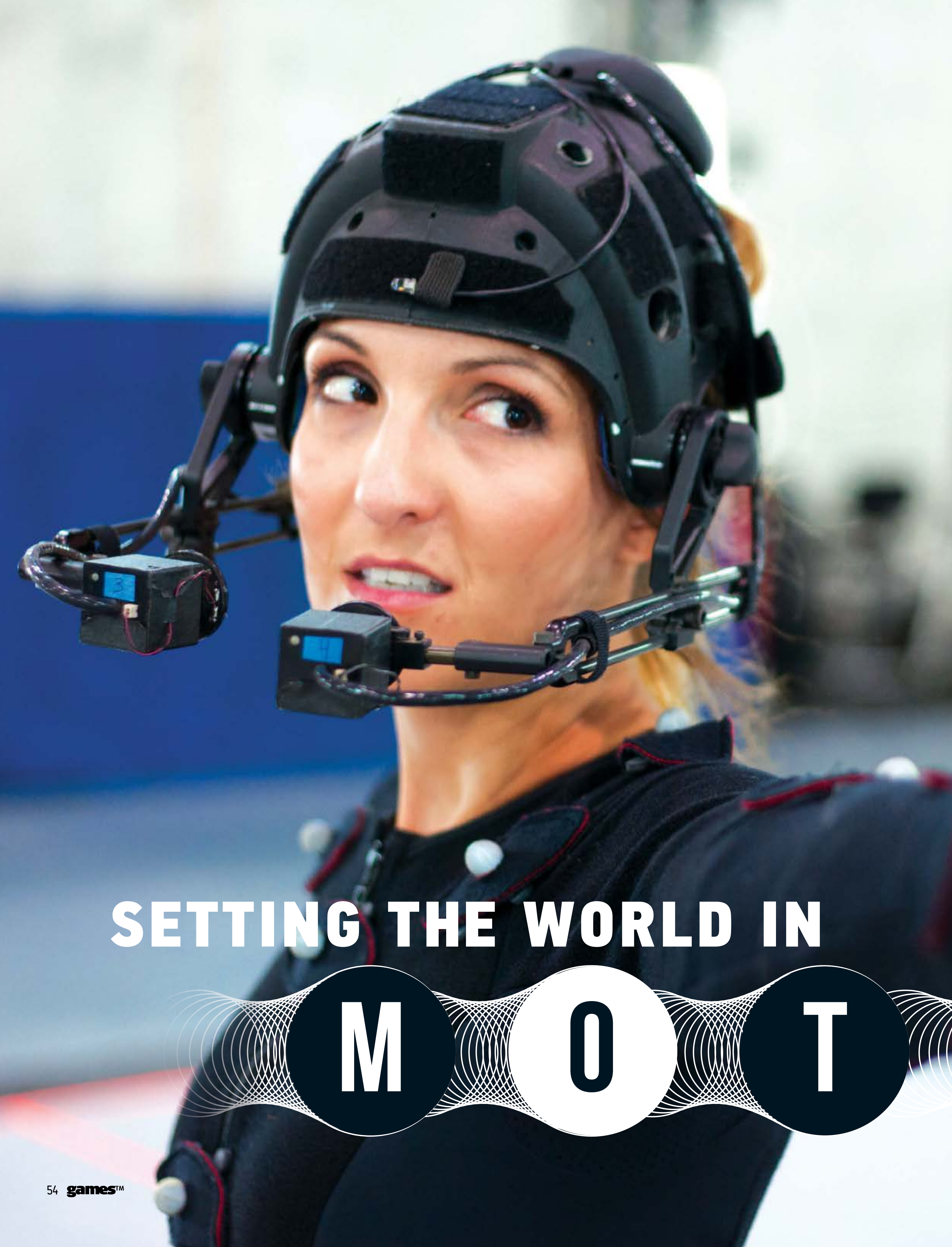
» mix of making sure they don't even know you exist, that they don't even know that you're in their vicinity at that point, or that they might have seen you, but you're stealthing your way out – like 'Fuck that, he's started shooting, but I've cloaked and I just run out' – what proportion of the system is allocated to each of these pillars that I've just mentioned, how do they interweave? It will be up to you guys to figure out once you play, but I think it's totally going back to the roots."

Perhaps most importantly those roots were born in a commitment to tell mature stories in videogame form and push the medium forward into a more adult realm. With its rich themes, political ideas and layered allegories, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* succeeded rather well in maintaining that legacy from Warren Spector's original vision. But as the industry as a whole matures and we see more games growing up and challenging us, we wondered if Eidos Montreal feels a responsibility to keep pushing that little bit harder than its peers to remain on the cutting edge.

"Yeah, I do personally and I know that Mary does. I would bet JF does too," Jacques-Belletête tells us, although he admits there's a balance to be struck between being 'adult' and still making a game that's accessible. "JF is the great median in the sense that he wants to keep it the way that it is, but JF is really good at making the choices, because the game still needs to sell to millions of people because it's so expensive to develop, so we need to broaden our audience all the time, but he's definitely the best one among us with juggling these opposites. Like I say all the time, it's a game that takes itself very seriously. There is very little humour. The humour is never in the story, it's in the little easter eggs we put around, in all the millions of emails we write up until the very last second. Adam has a type of irony, so there's a bit of humour coming out of him, but it's really, really dry."

Once again it's a question of contrasts. The commercial nature of gaming conflicting with artistic aspirations, but hopefully it produces something amazing in the process. Even Jacques-Belletête admits to his own contrasting take on life and game development as we wrap up our conversation. "I'm very serious with these things; I'm not so serious in life, but my cyberpunk and my noir has to be very mature, so I would like to maintain it that way and I know that I work towards that," he sums up. What that means for Adam Jensen's latest journey we look forward to finding out.





SETTING THE WORLD IN

M O T



COMPLEMENTING EVERY WELL-WRITTEN SCRIPT, EVERY WELL-DESIGNED LEVEL, EVERY WELL-ENGINEERED MECHANIC, THERE'S A TEAM OF PEOPLE BRINGING THE CAST TO LIFE. **WE GO BENEATH THE SKIN WITH ANAMATRIK AND FACEWARE – THE PEOPLE THAT BUILT YOUR FAVOURITE CHARACTERS** – TO TALK ABOUT MAKING A GAME FEEL MORE HUMAN

There's talk of a strike right now – a strike amongst voice actors that fear they aren't getting the recognition they deserve for the work they put in. It's a rational fear; film actors often become the main focus of the pictures they star in, whilst gamers are much more selfish with their avatars – characters on the screen are often a blank slate for *our* personalities to come through.

Or, that's how it used to be. Look at the recent trailers for *Star Citizen*, look at Kevin Spacey's appearance in *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare*. Look across to *Quantum Break* and the way Remedy Entertainment is fusing live-action footage with digital doubles in-game, or look at the likenesses between the main protagonists of *GTA V* and their in-game representations – you could argue that this game (with its 54 million plus sales and $2 billion gross) has far more reach than many film franchises.

As technology progresses, it's getting easier and easier for actors to actually act in games and have themselves be represented accurately. There used to be an elitism in the acting community regarding mo-cap – actors saw gaming appearances as less prestigious roles, a place to start your career, not to work towards. And yet, as games began to oust films as the best-selling medium, they started to get more respect; it wasn't just public opinion that changed, professional attitudes did as well.

"When I first started working in the industry, I think there was kind of a vibe in the actor community that mo-cap was a subset of the acting business, and this side of things may have been beneath »

other actors that thought they'd 'made it'," explains Brett Ineson, president and CEO of Animatrik – a company he set up with the express purpose of providing expert advice on motion capture, pre-visualisation and virtual cinematography to film, television and gaming studios.

"As motion capture roles have become so exciting and the results of the work have been so *good*, the tide has changed," Ineson continues. "Now, we see a completely different attitude out there, and we're seeing actors demand their agents find them motion-capture roles!"

"We certainly have seen an evolution in the sort of talent pool that has come in to the industry," continues Mataio Gardi, executive producer at Animatrik – and a veteran of the gaming industry with over ten years of experience producing and directing at EA, Ubisoft and Microsoft. "You know, we used to be in a stage where we'd see people over-acting for [performance capture], but as technology advances, we can actually do emotional scenes where we've got the camera *right* up to the face, so we can see every bit of detail. That actually allows the actor to think 'Hey, I can bring my craft to the mo-cap floor, and that'll be projected in a faithful and truthful manner into the actual game.'"

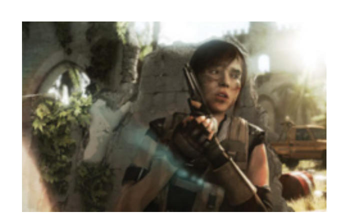
Working in a space devoid of an interactive set, yet filled with cameras and calibrated motion-tracking equipment – what the performance capture professionals call a 'volume' – could actually be viewed as a more 'pure' form of acting, it turns out. Being in a sparse room with few visual cues is more reminiscent of theatre acting than anything else, according to Ineson.

"Working in a green screen can be a huge turn-off for some actors, but there's other actors that sort-of grew up in the 'black box' of the theatre world, and they've trained their whole lives in an empty room and they've had to get into character and act like there's an army wrapped around them, or they are in a poverty-stricken ghetto or something. So those actors are like 'Oh this is cool, this is like theatre school!' when they walk into the volume [laughs]" He's right – there's something reminiscent of the Peter Moore school of acting about mo-cap: it relies wholly on the actor's imagination and interpretation of stimulus, and little on external factors. But – for actors more versed in modern techniques – there's always a solution.

"When I was working with a director back at Ubisoft," Gardi continues, "I remember him telling me the volume can be a 'hostile environment' for an actor – they're wearing these tights suits, there's this expensive intrusive tech all around them, they don't know what time of day it is… it's [stressful] for the talent. But now



■ *There's often just as much if not more tech involved in shooting a game than there is when shooting a blockbuster movie.*

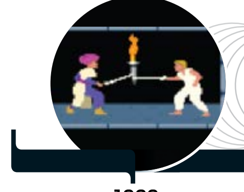


■ *Digital doubles will soon be the norm in the games industry.*

BEING IN A SPARSE ROOM WITH FEW VISUAL CUES IS MORE REMINISCENT OF THEATRE ACTING THAN ANYTHING ELSE

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MOTION CAPTURE

Performance capture hasn't always been this comprehensive – in fact, when it started, the tech behind it was actually fairly primitive…



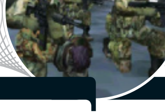
1989
Using a style of animation called rotoscoping (developed by Max Fleischer in 1915], *Prince Of Persia*'s unique art style was applied to videogames for the first time, inspiring other rotoscoped projects later – namely *Another World* and *Flashback*.



1992
Mortal Kombat was one of the first (in)famous games to use motion capture – the actors themselves even appearing in-game. The capture was only in 2D, though – profiles of the actors caught and applied to sprite-based movement strings



1996
Not the most notable game of all time, but a pioneer for motion capture, the origin game of the *SoulCalibur* series (*Soul Edge*) was the first game to use a passive optical system for its motion capture, what we recognise now as those lycra/ping pong ball suits.



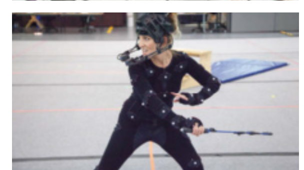
2001
Full body 3D animation was beginning to become more commonplace at the turn of the millennium – especially in Japan. The *Onimusha* series was particularly notable on the PS2, while *Tom Clancy* started on a strong footing over on the Xbox.

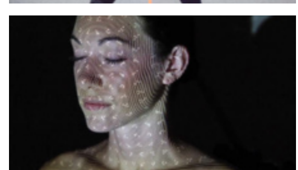


we've got the ability and the tech to be able to show them what we're after, and the director can coax them through what they want. So, now, we can even bring up the 'sets' and stuff on giant screens around them – that might help show them where their characters are going to be and ease them into these worlds a little better."

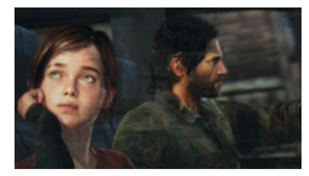
This undercuts the problem a lot of actors thought about when motion capture came to mind – that they would get lost, that what they could bring to the game would be over-shadowed or diluted by the technology available. "[Progressing technology] opened the talent book *wide* to us, you know?" explains Gardi. "We're now working with casting directors that open up the complete pool of talent – there's never any exclusion of anyone. The casting director and the game director themselves therefore work to find the right person, whoever that may be, and strive to go out and get them."











■ *Actors now actively seek performance capture roles in the hopes of boosting their portfolio.*

And the result of this increasing popularity? A better product for everyone: a better game for us, the player; a better role for the actor to play; a better realisation of the director's original vision and a better end product for the publisher/developer. Advances in how accurately and respectfully we can capture actors' likenesses and emotional intent means advances in script and art – and overall, that basically means better games.

"I think we're starting to think outside the box like that [as an industry]," explains Peter Busch, VP of business development at Faceware Technologies – the company behind facial animations and performance capture for *GTA V*, *Destiny* and *Halo: Reach* amongst many others. "I also think it speaks volumes for the actors – if people like Kevin Spacey are willing and wanting to do projects like this, it's only going to get more recognisable actors involved. And that's good, because *so* much of games storytelling is down to the acting. Performance is *paramount* – and if we're getting better actors, they're going to be telling better stories, and you're going to empathise more because you recognise the faces and people… and that makes everything much more powerful."

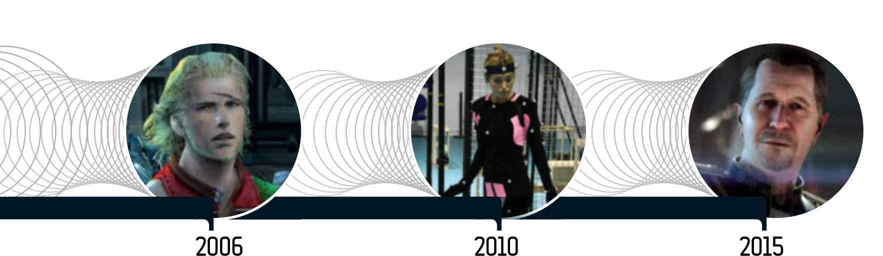
We're already in a situation where certain actors have a monopoly on voice acting in games – there's an old joke about Nolan North, Troy Baker and Jennifer Hale making up around 100% of the industry's vocal talent – but if film/TV actors were to start being encouraged wholly into games (voice, face, motion and all) then they'd start approaching the level of celebrity in games that we see in films or TV.

Have you ever bought a game just because there's an actor you like in it? We haven't… but that might start to change very soon.

"I don't know if *every* studio is going to take that risk – some directors think gaming should still be a total escape from everything, and they don't want to bring too many real-world elements into their games," Busch continues, "but that's a very different type of storytelling – we're interested to see what the, you know, *key* franchises that are focused on story are going to start doing with things…"

Busch is talking about the *Assassin's Creed*s, the *Halo*s and the *Call Of Duty*s here – the yearly iterations that have become the 'popcorn film' staple of yearly gaming. With the budgets these studios have, we feel there's a responsibility on them to iterate with motion capture – to pave the way for smaller brands and studios, and make use of the huge fanbase they have by celebrating the acting talent and technology that can only, really, be showcased in games.

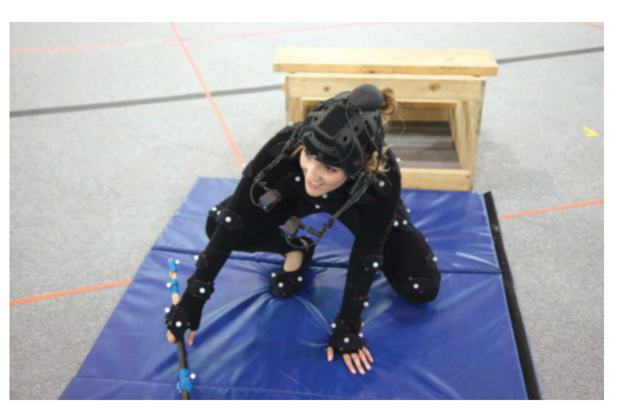
"From our standpoint, we're seeing a lot more indie developers become more ambitious and aim for full performance capture… not just motion capture, but full facial animation and full body capture," explains Busch. "Then you've got the higher end of developers – Rockstar and EA, for example – that have been using performance capture for *years* but now are taking it to the next level, especially in the levels of volume they're recording. Something like [*GTA V*] has 100+ hours or motion capture data in it that [Rockstar] is trying to produce with very small team sizes. So the studio is getting around that by trying to automate and batch process large portions of the workload." »



2006
By the end of the PS2 era, games had got facial animation capture down to a good level – games like *Final Fantasy XII* pushed the 64-bit generation of consoles hard, and produced believable characters as a result. It was a taste of what was to come on the PS3 and 360.

2010
Heavy Rain's release captured the wider world's imagination, with digital doubles for actors. Using the Havok engine, the game (with a budget of 16.7 million Euros) mixed full body and motion capture with advanced skin shaders, and real-time tears and facial wrinkles.

2015
We're cautious of the term 'uncanny valley' but the work of *Star Citizen* developer Cloud Imperium Games is becoming increasingly startling – using recognisable actors who are appearing as digital doubles in-game.



■ *Padding and rubber props are necessary when capturing stunts.*

LIGHTS
MoCap studios are typically very bright – the white nodes on the actors suits *need* to be keyed onto all cameras at all times, so visibility is vital

CAMERAS
Depending on how many frames of data per second the animation team requires, more cameras will be installed in the studio

ACTORS
Actors wear special suits that are interpreted by the cameras in the room and feed back to a computer, 'mapping' the animation in a 3D field

PROPS
Guns, swords and other objects might also be fitted with special white nodes that will be tracked and – separately – recorded in the animation data

MICROPHONE
Some studios (like Ubisoft Toronto) decide to film movement, voice and face at the same time, going for true-to-life 3D performances

STUDIO DIRECTOR
Either the animation director or a studio head will oversee the session, to make sure the actors are moving in exactly the way the game needs

INSIDE A MOTION CAPTURE STUDIO

Once the characters are made to *look* real, the motion capture team starts to make them *feel* real

Before motion capture was the go-to way of animating characters in-game, it would have taken a team of animators *months* to achieve what can now be done in an afternoon. That said, there's still very much a place for keyframe animation in the industry – performance capture may be the most convenient way of setting up libraries of information for a studio's art teams to apply within a game engine, but it's not a catch-all solution.

"As an animator, I know that animating humans is very time-consuming and it's just not that exciting, if I'm honest," explains Brett Ineson. "So motion capture tends to absolutely excel in that arena. It's a no-brainer to use it there, in fact. In some of these games we work on, though, you get things like a human fighting a pterodactyl… we haven't quite worked out how to capture things like that, so… [laughs]"



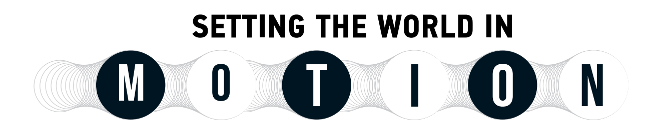
■ *Performance capture technology moves incredibly quickly, and gets more realistic-looking every year.*

"When I was back at Ubisoft," Gardi continues, "we had a robust keyframe animation unit to support of performance capture teams. If, for whatever reason, you don't get everything perfect on set and you can't go back and re-record something, a lot of the changes will happen on the ground floor with the animators."

There are advances being made in how motion capture can be applied to non-humanoid shapes, though – and it's another way an actor can improve or alter their performance that they might not be able to do in other mediums. "I guess you could call it puppeteering in a way," he says. "What we do typically, if there's a radical shift in proportions or the type of character other than a human, is we go through a period of training with the actor. We put them in front of what we call a 'digital mirror': we get the actor in the suit, map the character to their movements, and map them onto the model in real-time. They can then look at themselves in this mirror and they walk around and get the feel for how their movement is translating onto the digital character."

Thanks to the ever-improving side of engine technology, software like Unreal or CryEngine can render the actor (and their new digital self) movement for movement, facial expression for facial expression. "That way, the actor can understand if they hold their arms in a certain way, it won't work for the character because, say, the character might have a *very* large stomach or something like that," Ineson continues. "The actors then start to adjust the way they move, and continue to practice, and eventually they'll develop muscle memory and become able to be that character in the scenes."

This is part and parcel of what developers expect when they turn up to a shoot, now. When Anamatrik was capturing performance for the *Gears Of War: Ultimate Edition*, Microsoft Studios and The Coalition turned up with shoulder



THE RIG
Without the rig, none of the cameras or lights would keep their position in the specific grid they need to be in; it's vital that this is consistent

SOUND
While some sound will be recorded in a specific studio, general effects, impact sounds and some dialogue might be recorded on-set, for added realism

REAL-TIME VISUALS
Some studios have the facilities to directly interpret the animation data into an in-game situation, putting the actor into the world

RECORDING
A series of computers hooked up to the cameras will receive the 3D data as it's recorded, transmitting the data to 3D rendering software

I don't think there are any weaknesses in animation; right now, I think we're just getting better at conveying emotion

pads and 'armour' made from American Football gear to load onto their actors, so they knew exactly how to move in the situation. "Now that performance capture has reached a certain level of maturity in the industry, most games producers tend to turn up to the shoots quite prepared. In the beginning days, things were a bit more 'loosey-goosey' but I think that attitude is now largely behind us. Most producers and their staff are now very well structured, well planned out (and very well rehearsed!) before they come and see us," explains Ineson.

"When it comes to the projects I've worked on like *Assassin's Creed* or *Splinter Cell*, we'd run those sets very similarly to what you'd see on film or on TV backstage," reveals Gardi. "We'd have script supervisors there, we'd have props on standby, we'd have weapons specialists and directors – the whole thing had to run like clockwork. We'd broken the script down in movie magic, right? So we knew we'd hired the volume out for, say, 20 days. Each day we'd know exactly how much footage we'd need to get out of that – we'd need to get 90 minutes in 20 days, so that means getting 'x' minutes of completed footage per day. We'd always make sure there was a forward momentum on set, so if we did run into problems we could deal with that."

We found it fascinating to hear how different studios dealt with their various tasks – another motion capture specialist we spoke to told us that Ubisoft is beginning to construct an 'asset library' of sorts for its games, so the various studios across the world can use them as in their own projects – minimising pressure and maximising content. Bungie, however, when working on games like *Halo: Reach* or *Destiny* (which specialise in *incredibly* specific animations from a first-person perspective) take a slightly different route.





■ *Facial capture tech is now built around light, rather than white tracking nodes.*

The pipeline has been fairly consistent for [Bungie] between *Halo* and *Destiny*," explains Busch, "so that's allowed the studio to focus on the quality of the art – the quality of the *motion* – between iterations. The quality jumps we've seen, therefore, have been focused on the quality of the character models instead, the quality of the rigs, the animations the artists have access to when building the characters… all that's a *lot* better.

"When Bungie comes to us and says 'Hey, we need to focus on 50 seconds of animation', some other studios need to produce that in an hour… but the *Destiny* guys took *six weeks*. That level of focus really allowed the team to pinpoint and advance what they're doing."

So, if studios can capture animations that specific, and can begin to really hone their various crafts when it comes to things as minute as weapon reloads and the minutiae of hand movements… what could possibly come next? "I think we're only limited by the capabilities of engines, really, and the sort of emotion you *can* convey in your rigging of characters," says Ineson. "But as engines start being able to push with more horsepower and developers are getting used to the new tech, we're beginning to close that gap."

"On PS4 and Xbox One, I think we're going to see some very interesting facial animations come out," continues Gardi. "I don't think there are any weaknesses in animation; right now, I think we're just getting *better* at conveying the emotion you see on faces. Especially as improvements are continually being made to the memory footprint engines give you, and we can put more bones into virtual character's faces, and so on."

We've already seen how lifelike Naughty Dog is making *Uncharted 4*'s Drake, and we've already seen the incredible detail Kevin Spacey has been rendered with in *Advanced Warfare*… and we're only at the start of the generation. With studios like Faceware and Animatrik working with some visionary directors and studios across the industry, we might be on the verge of *really* crossing into that fabled uncanny valley for the very first time in games.

gamesTM

BUYER'S GUIDE

AS THE YEAR DRAWS TO A CLOSE WE HUNT DOWN THE BEST BARGAINS AND UNSUNG GAMING EXPERIENCES YOU CAN SPEND YOUR HARD-EARNED HOLIDAY MONEY ON

GAMES YOU MISSED

DON'T LET THESE GEMS PASS YOU BY



PROJECT CARS

Price Range: **£39.99/$49.99**

Formats: **Various** Score: **9**

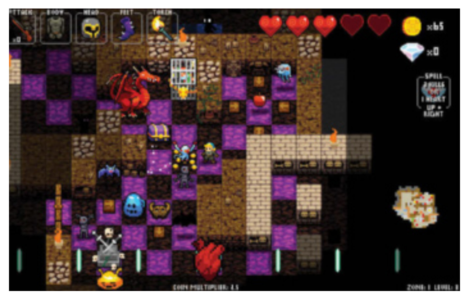
On Xbox One all the recent attention has been on *Forza 6*, and with good reason, but for everyone else it's still been too quick to forget the year's first sim racer, a fine example of what the genre could be doing to push forward from Slightly Mad Studios. The big move, albeit a rather simple one, was to have all content unlocked for campaigns from the start. No working your way up from a Ford Focus to a McLaren F1 in this game. Strap in and drive. While we wait on *Gran Turismo*, *Projects CARS* remains an essential driving experience.

CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER

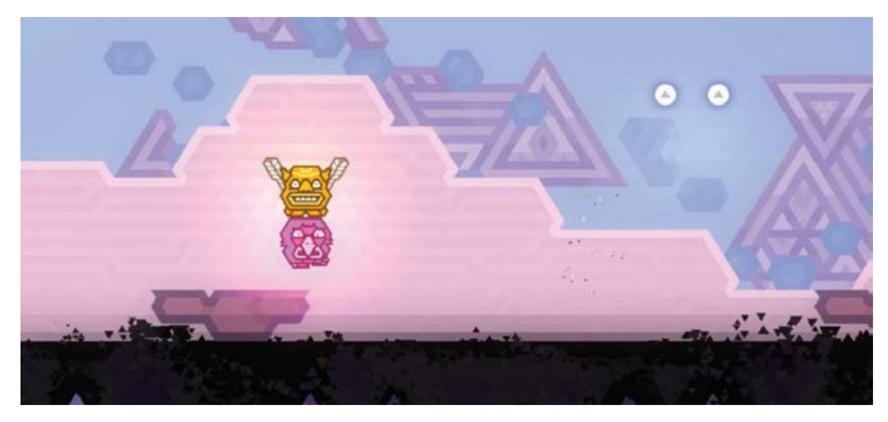
Price Range: **£10.99/$14.99**

Formats: **PS4, PC, PS Vita** Score: **8**

By combining the roguelike with turn-based strategy and rhythm action, this is one of the most refreshingly imaginative games we've played all year. With a fantastic score (and the option to use your own MP3 collection too) moving to the beat around randomly-generated dungeons is a challenge that demands repeat visits.







KALIMBA

Price Range: **£6.99/$9.99** Formats: **Xbox One, PC** Score: **9**

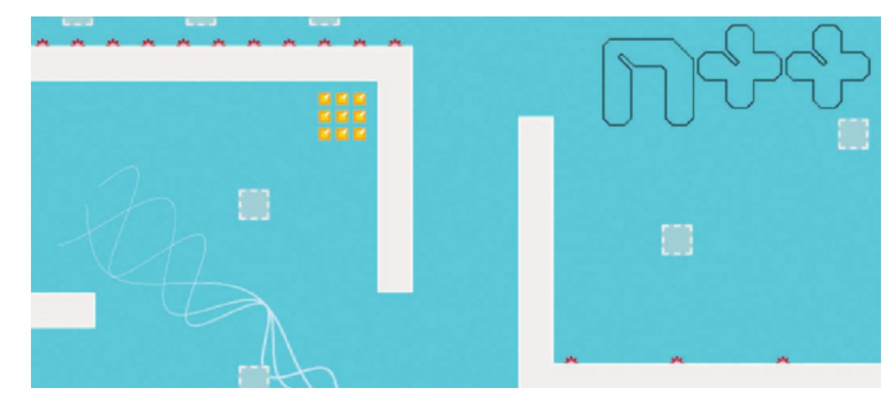
One of the brightest puzzle platformers we've played in a long time, using both the colourful and intelligent meanings of the word, *Kalimba* offers the kind of lightness of touch and depth of challenge that few games can pull off. The simple dual totem mechanics are used to great effect as you must navigate a colour-coded world with the correct character. In co-op it's a little messy, but still a lot of fun.



GUILTY GEAR XRD –SIGN–

Price Range: **£39.99/$49.99** Formats: **PS4, PS3** Score: **8**

The generation has gotten off to a good start with fighters so far and this new effort from the *Guilty Gear* series ranks among the very best. It didn't get much of a fanfare for its digital-only European release and no one appears to have been too bothered in North America either, but the graphics and gameplay of this release are superb. An essential play for anyone with *Street Fighter V* already on the radar.



N++

Price Range: **£15.99/$19.99** Formats: **PS4** Score: **9**

This sequel to the digital classic does everything a great follow-up should. It's tougher, brighter, and more engaging. It tweaks and plays with the near-perfect gameplay of the original game and delivers something even better. *N++* is a game that demands skill and precision, and having paved the way for games like *Super Meat Boy*, it has picked up that rock-hard platforming baton with flair.

XBOX ONE



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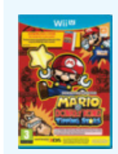
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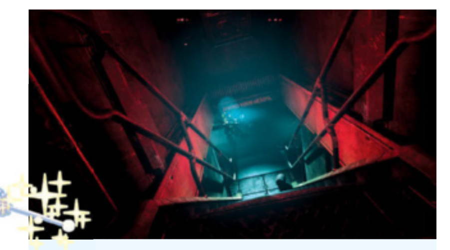
*Prices correct at time of going to press



TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

Price Range: **£15.99/$19.99 (season pass)** Formats: **Various** Score: **N/A**

We've been oohing and aahing over *Life Is Strange* more than most other episodic games this year, but let's give a little time to Telltale's quietly excellent effort set on Pandora. It got off to a slow start, but *Tales From The Borderlands* quickly established itself as a worthy expansion of the universe, packed with personality and incredibly fun gameplay twists on Telltale's traditional style.



SOMA

Price Range: **£23.99/$29.99**
Formats: **PS4** Score: **8**

Another horror-influenced game, *SOMA* has also received some very flattering comparisons to *BioShock*. It's a deeply disturbing and engaging experience rather than a purely terrifying one and it takes you into the heart of madness and darkness much like Irrational's celebrated experience did. It's certainly the closest we've seen so far this generation, but it stands on its own too.



UNTIL DAWN

Price Range: **£49.99/$59.99**
Formats: **PS4** Score: **8**

Bringing together various interactive storytelling ideas that many PS4 titles have been playing with recently, *Until Dawn* is a great mix of horror clichés and fun gaming challenges. With every character in the game a potential victim, your choices and QTE skills are challenged throughout. It might not be as unceasingly gruesome as some horror fans want, but its mechanical advances are spot on.



PILLARS OF ETERNITY

Price Range: **£34.99/$44.99** Formats: **PC** Score: **9**

Looking back, this has actually been a great year for tactical role-playing, and *Pillars Of Eternity* from Obsidian is the best of the bunch. Harnessing the studio's wealth of experience in the genre, it delivers the most fresh-feeling and refined interpretation of the form we've played. It has the stop-and-start gameplay, but it also has tough dungeons and plenty of creative options.



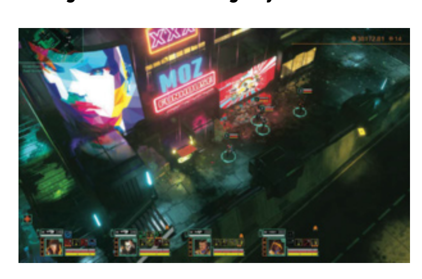
ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

Price Range: **£15.99/$19.99** Formats: **Xbox One, PC** Score: **9**

A glorious mix of art style and mechanical perfection, *Ori And The Blind Forest* may have the look of a pleasant romp through a magical world, but it has the heart of a metroidvania mixed with *Super Meat Boy*. It's easily the strongest indie exclusive on the Xbox One and absolutely needs to be played by anyone who appreciates a platforming and exploration challenge.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

More games worth adding to your collection



SATELLITE REIGN

PC

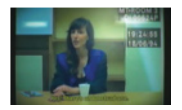
A more than worthy successor to the *Syndicate Wars* franchise, made by some of the original's designers, *Satellite Reign* is one of the best tactical role-players we've enjoyed all year. A particular must-buy for cyberpunk enthusiasts.



INFINIFACTORY

PC

A pretty fantastic and brain-testing puzzler, this game draws on our increased familiarity with crafting with an industrial twist. The slow burn of challenge is really satisfying and makes the whole game very fulfilling to complete.



HER STORY

PC, iOS

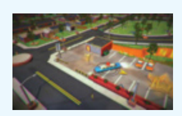
One of the more unique games we've played in recent memory, *Her Story*'s approach to interactive narrative is sparse. There are new prompts or nudges, just a series of videos to discover and play. And perhaps a terrible mystery to unfold...



BEYOND EYES

Multi

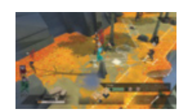
For a different pace of game, this gorgeous interpretation of navigating a world without sight was one of the most surprising indies we've played in the while. We knew it would deliver visually, but the gameplay was fascinating too.



ROUNDABOUT

Xbox One, PC

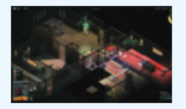
We've said it many times: we just love spinning limousine games. What No Goblin put together with its tongue-in-cheek FMV sequences and bizarre gameplay concept was one of the best score-attack games we've played this generation.



MASSIVE CHALICE

Xbox One, PC

Can you keep your dynasty alive and your people fighting a never-ending war through smart alliances and arranged marriages? That's the challenge that overlays this solid if occasionally inconsistent tactical outing.



INVISIBLE, INC.

PS4, PC, iOS

To find a stealth game that actually encourages speed of movement and quick wits over camping in dark corners is incredibly satisfying and *Invisible, Inc.* delivers. It's all delivered with SRPG trappings and some great procedural design.

PS4



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FAMILY-FRIENDLY FAVOURITES

SOME QUICK PICKS FOR ENJOYING TOGETHER



ROCK BAND 4 BAND-IN-A-BOX

Price Range: **£229.99/$249.99**
Formats: **PS4, Xbox One**
Players: **1-4 local**

As a solo player the decision between *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* is a tough one, but for multiplayer, when you have people visiting, there remains only one choice that makes sense. Playing as a band in *Rock Band 4* remains the best way to enjoy the experience as up to four players get the chance to live out a rock god fantasy. The song selection is a little mixed, but if you've already invested in tracks then you have another good reason to upgrade.



LEGO DIMENSIONS STARTER PACK

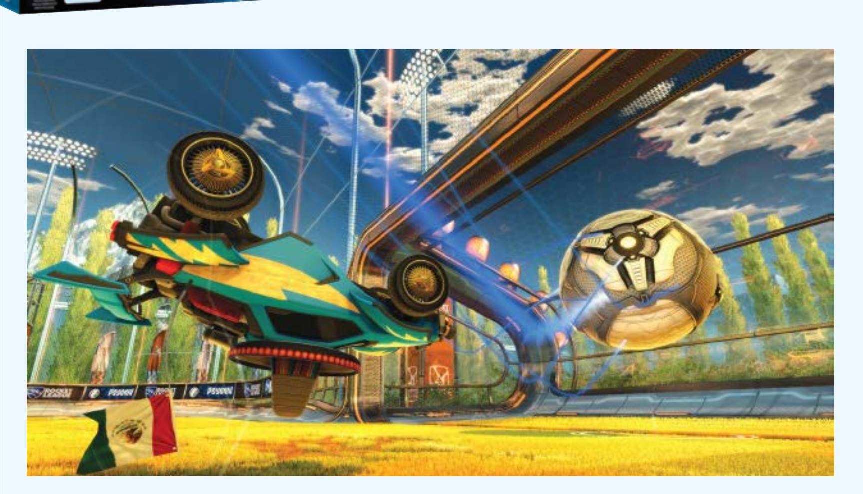
Price Range: **£79.99/$99.99**
Formats: **Multi** Players: **1-2 local**

Getting into *LEGO Dimensions* could prove to be an expensive hobby, but that doesn't take away from the fact that the LEGO titles remain some of the best for coach co-op gaming and *Dimensions* opens up so much more potential with all of its figures and characters. If you're content that your bank balance can take the hit over the coming months, then this is the game you want to be playing with friends and family.

DISNEY INFINITY 3.0 STARTER PACK

Price Range: **£49.99/$64.99**
Formats: **Multi**
Players: **1-2 local/2-4 online**

There are several reasons why we recommend *Disney Infinity*. One is the figures, whose art style remains a highlight for many, even if some aren't into it. We also love the basic gameplay of the series, which has just the right level of creativity and challenge while remaining accessible. Finally, the Toybox creative suite is excellent, allowing you to create and share your own little segments of this universe in fun and engaging ways.



ROCKET LEAGUE

Price Range: **£14.99/$19.99** Formats: **PS4, PC** Players: **1-4 local/2-8 online**

For something a little more competitive, the split-screen and online experience of playing *Rocket League* is precisely the reason why it's been one of the most talked-about indie releases of the last year. This wonderfully bizarre mashup of football, driving, and floaty physics and mad car customisation is a great way to kill time after a few drinks out or just to entertain yourselves on a Sunday afternoon. Classic couch gaming.



YOSHI'S WOOLLY WORLD

Price Range: **£39.99/$49.99**
Formats: **Wii U** Players: **1-2**

This is probably the best *Yoshi* title since *Super Mario World 2* and that's saying something. *Woolly World* captures the essence of the character's appeal really well and what's more makes for a very fun co-op gaming experience. Plus the casual mode means that you can enjoy a playthrough with anyone, regardless of their previous gaming experience. It's a delightfully cheerful and engaging way to play with friends.

GAMER GIFTS

SOME INTERESTING IDEAS BEYOND YOUR CONSOLE OR PC



FALLOUT BEER

Price: **£29.99**
Available From: **amazon.co.uk**

If you're planning a marathon session in the Commonwealth (or know someone who is) then you're going to want some refreshment and thanks to a partnership between Bethesda and Carlsberg you now have an official product to enjoy in the form of *Fallout* beer. It's perhaps a shame that it doesn't glow in the dark, but you can't have everything.



ASSASSIN'S CREED POP VINYL

Price: **£8.99 each**
Available From: **forbiddenplanet.com**

Funko Pop! Vinyls, as anyone who collects them will tell you, are cute as hell and the latest for *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* feature the same level of attention to detail mixed with Funko style that makes them all so desirable. Here Jacob and Evie Frye have been made desktop ready for any *Creed* fans who want to be reminded of their Victorian adventures.



TURTLE BEACH ELITE 800X

Price: **£249.99** Available From: **turtlebeach.com**

The latest headset hardware from Turtle Beach may be a little pricy, but you get a lot of value from the extra cash. The audio fidelity of these headphones on both Xbox One and PS4 is top-notch with minimal sound leakage meaning that they're perfect for gaming with others around without disturbing them. If you're sharing living space, they're essential.



HALO: FLEET BATTLES

Price: **£80**
Available From: **shop.spartangames.co.uk**

This is a pretty epic-looking board game incarnation of a massive UNSC versus Covenant battle in space and it's really pretty incredible for the money too. Hours of gameplay are more than likely as you delve into the tactical possibilities. Since split-screen isn't an option on *Halo 5*, this is the next best option for some local *Halo* multiplayer.





RETRON 5

Price: **$159.99**
Available From: **hyperkin.com**

With all of the attention 2015's biggest releases will likely be getting, let's spare a little for the sadly neglected retro games you might have in your collection. The best way to give these classics a refresh is to grab one of these beauties. The Retron 5 is one of the best multi-format game consoles we've ever seen. It works remarkably well, so if you have a good range of titles to play on it, we'd recommend giving it a try.



> "I remember my sister driving me to tournaments that were an hour's drive away because I was too young to get there myself"
>
> **DAVID "PHREAK" TURLEY, SHOUTCASTER, RIOT**



WHY I ❤...

STARCRAFT

DAVID "PHREAK" TURLEY, SHOUTCASTER, RIOT

"*The big game for me that really got me into eSports was the original* StarCraft. *I was a big fan of SlayerS_BoxeR, I was a big fan of Bisu. I remember following it through grade school/middle school, and I remember my sister driving me to tournaments that were an hour's drive away because I was too young to get there myself, and I remember winning one match and then bombing out but not caring because I got to play in a WCG qualifier! That was the first game that, at age 13, opened me up to wanting to be a pro-gamer – but it wasn't until* StarCraft II *that I started to actually get better at it! But it wasn't until* League Of Legends *that I actually got good at it all. It's always been isometric, top-down army games that have ended up growing my skillset and my appreciation of eSports.*"

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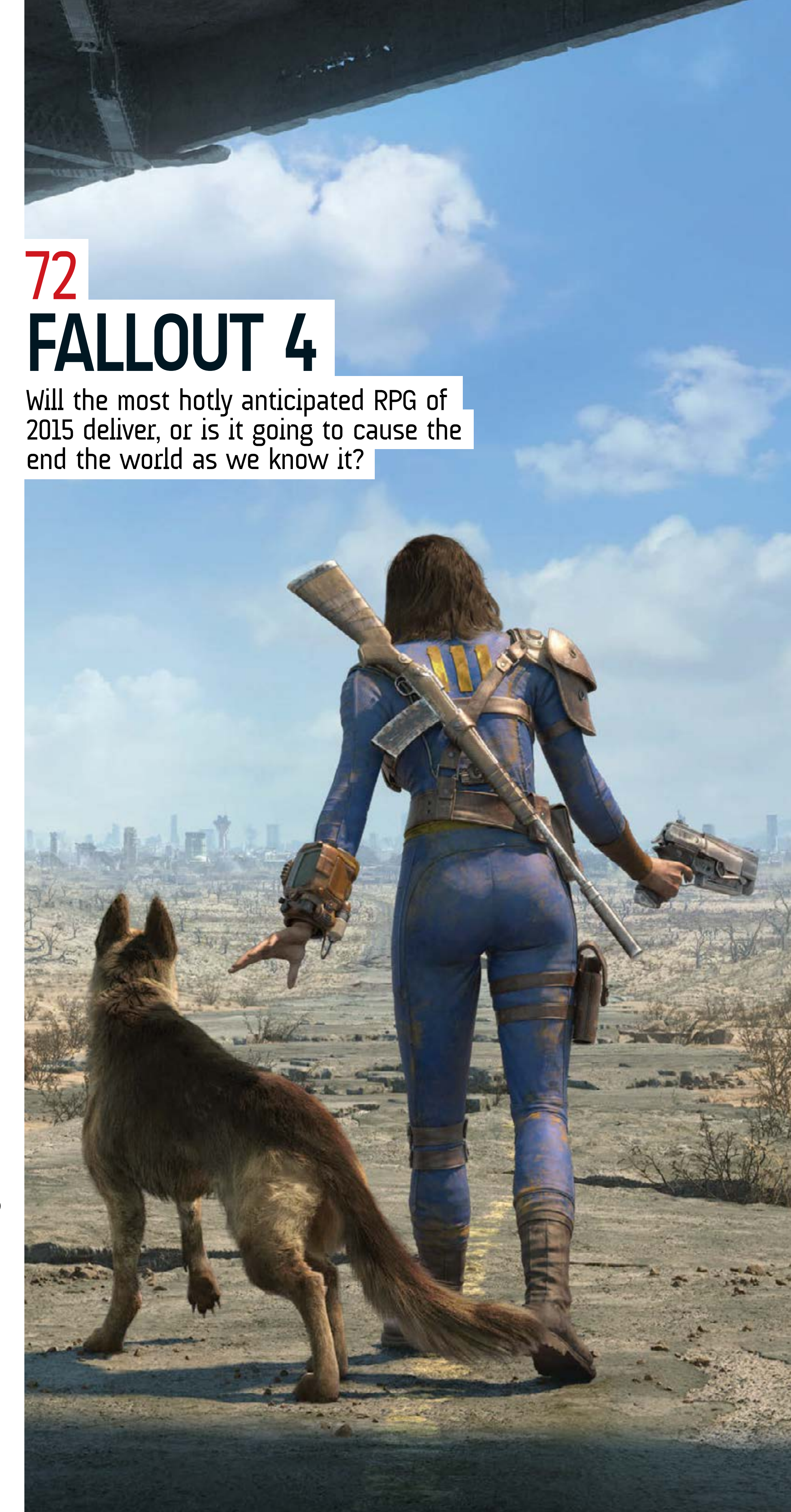
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Reviews



72

FALLOUT 4

Will the most hotly anticipated RPG of 2015 deliver, or is it going to cause the end the world as we know it?

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.

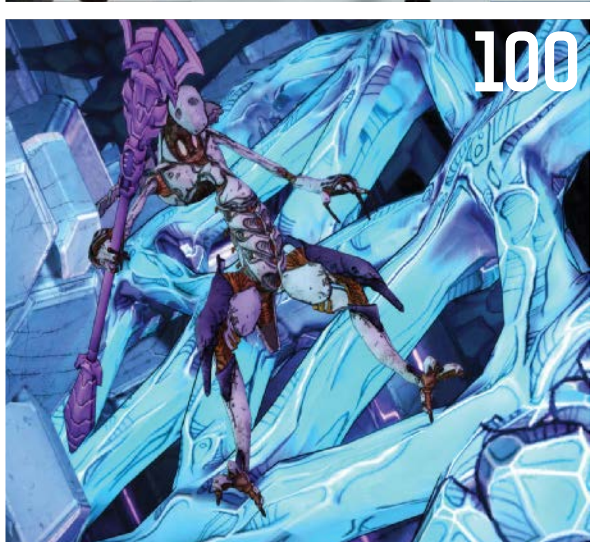












AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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FALLOUT... FALLOUT DID CHANGE... THEN IT CHANGED BACK

Fallout 4

Nobody wanted to set the world on fire, but it still happened anyway. What makes this story unique, though it's been told many times over throughout this series, is that in *Fallout 4* you get to see one of the initial blasts that ended the world. It's not something you'd call brave or particularly emotive, but it is damn cool to finally see that end of the world we've heard so much about for almost 20 years now.

Once the introductory sequence, covering the alternative, 1950s-inspired history/future has run its course, though, you're back into very familiar territory. In a literal sense less so, with *Fallout 4* set in Boston, Massachusetts and a few New England areas – but generally speaking, this is something those who picked up *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas* will know very well indeed. A mostly dead world. Eerie, dreamlike exploration of a ruined landscape. Dangers and death at every turn. Rust.

Exploring the Commonwealth, as *Fallout 4*'s region is known, is one of gaming's great experiences. As you're heading from one place to another, objective in mind and destination marked, there's always something in the corner of your eye that's going to pull your attention away, that's going to make you break from the beaten path and *discover*. It's *Fallout*, so what you find tends to be along the same lines: burnt out, destroyed, radiated, riddled with hostile people, beasts or things. But it doesn't get old – there's wonder in a world that's so familiar, made up of places you know, or have heard of, or landmarks you've seen – be it in real life or the movies. And this combines with the other wonder – that of the unfamiliar; the unknown.

As with *Fallout*s past, *Fallout 4* is riddled with the after-effects of a nuclear war and 200 years of something like life existing on the almost-dead planet. From the society-less humans, whether they be scavengers, survivors, those clinging to a past they don't remember or those embracing their animalistic urges to destroy and conquer; through the mutated beasts of the wild (introducing: cat-sized mosquitoes!); and covering the traditional, once-human super mutants, there's everything you'd expect out there to chat, trade and fight – mostly fight – with. This time around there's an additional, story-specific type of foe to contend with too in

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Bethesda Game Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



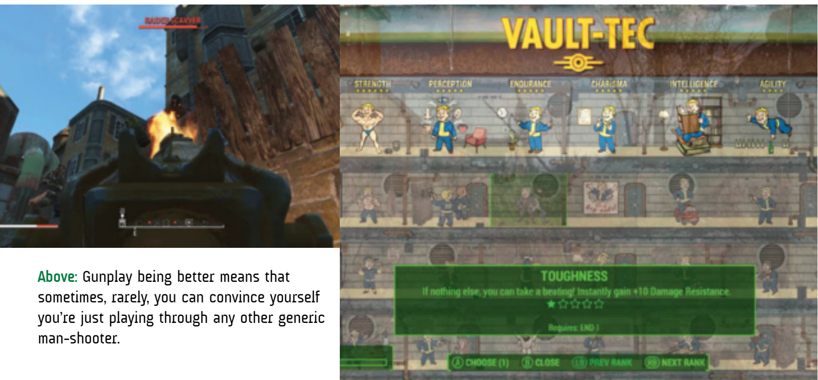
Below: Your ability to target and cripple different limbs is still a tactical decision that comes to play in split-second decisions, but now you have the chance to manually trigger critical hits when the bar fills up.



WHEN DOGMEAT GETS IN YOUR WAY FOR THE 30TH TIME IN ANY GIVEN HOUR, THERE'S A REAL DESIRE TO SEND THAT POOCH TO THE FARM

MINE-WHAT?

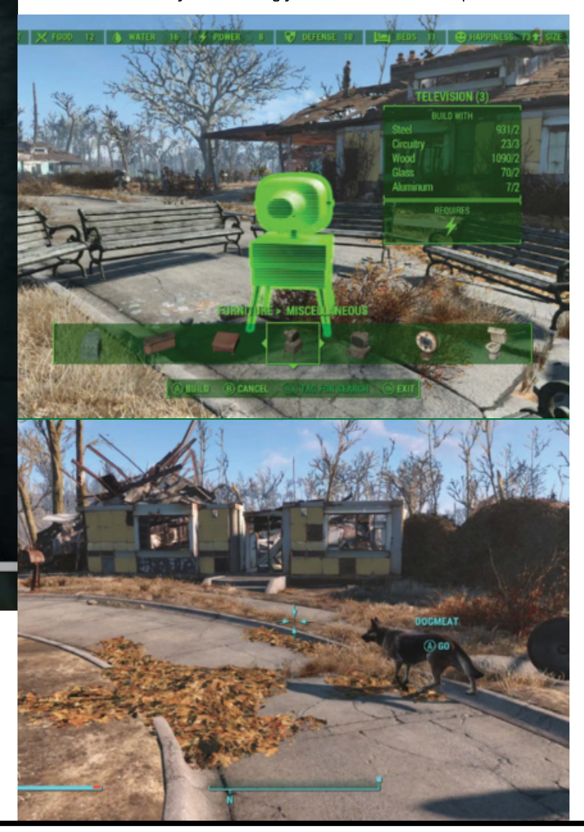
Crafting is big in games, if you haven't heard, and it's made its way into *Fallout 4*. Fortunately, it feels less like a hasty me-too move and actually works as something that draws you in more to the world of being a wastelander. Building settlements for people to actually live in, rather than just exist, modifying the weapons you scrounge with scrap you scavenge, cooking the fruits and meats you find to make them health-boosting and *not radioactive* – it all makes sense in the setting. It also gives you a real use for the junk found around the world, and makes otherwise-irrelevant items vital to your progress through the game. Remember: adhesive is very important. Keep your eyes open for duct tape and glue.



Above: Gunplay being better means that sometimes, rarely, you can convince yourself you're just playing through any other generic man-shooter.



Above: While the cityscapes may bore after a while, when you get out into ground zero things get really eerie, interesting and starkly beautiful. **Below:** Crafting is one of the big new elements to *Fallout 4*, with settlements relying on your knowledge of council planning trends to turn a bombed out crater into a working habitat. It's neat, but it's absolutely not something you have to do in the most part.



the shape of synths: an addition that makes us think someone at Bethesda has been watching a fair bit of *Blade Runner* and playing a bit more *Syndicate*.

These varying friends and foes all come together across a campaign storyline that, unlike previous Bethesda games, errs on the side of pretty bloody good. It's not superb, it doesn't compete with focused narrative games like, say, *The Last Of Us* or *Life Is Strange*, but for a developer that has consistently pushed out games that lack in the core storyline, *Fallout 4* offers a huge step up. Conflicts arise from factions of very different ideologies, your role in each is as deep or shallow as you want it to be and, of course, the ultimate decisions lay in your hands.

You may note, though, that we avoided saying this is the best story the *Fallout* series has produced. The simple fact is, *Fallout 4*'s core campaign just doesn't live up to that which Obsidian produced alongside its wonderful *Fallout: New Vegas*. While Bethesda's latest does ape the spin-off in some ways – namely in the competing factions – it falls short of really investing a huge, ongoing sense of cause and effect on the player. While what you do does have an impact, eventually, it doesn't actually feel that way until much later on – and at some points it's actually marked, very clearly, in an on-screen prompt that what you are about to do will change things irrevocably. This might be something down to personal choice, but we preferred *New Vegas*' approach of 'you break you buy' – you make your choices, the consequences happen, you live with your decisions. Or reload a save.

It's not ruinous to *Fallout 4*, instead acting as one of quite a few ways in which the game hasn't moved on – or even taken much inspiration from the hitherto most recent game in the series. *Fallout 4* holds closer to the third game rather than *New Vegas*, which makes sense given that was an entirely different team. But the gambling-centric game seemed more confident in embracing its RPG roots, successfully combining the new 3D world of *Fallout* with more traditional role-playing sensibilities. While Bethesda's latest is technologically superior, it's a shame to see some of that influence didn't rub off.

Something that has made the successful jump, on the other hand, is the frequency of the glitches. The curse of Bethesda games. Many of which fall into the category of harmless silliness – bodies just glitching into the scenery, NPCs spawning inside buildings they can't get out of, general rough-around-the-edges-ness. But some issues run deeper and genuinely affect enjoyment of the game – the main one being some truly poor pathfinding on the part of the AI. This sometimes works in your favour, with a raider getting caught up between a bollard and a bin, say, but more often than not we found it to be something that had a negative impact on your own companions.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PLAYABILITY: While previous *Fallout*s felt more like an RPG with game elements bolted on at the last minute, *Fallout 4* goes some way to remedying that. Not all for the best, but a welcome effort.

This *Fallout* staple has been about from day one – you don't try to rebuild (or re-destroy, or whatever you want to do) civilisation without some chums at hand. *Fallout 4* brings you Dogmeat the German Shepherd pretty quickly, and a host of future friends (or enemies, or lovers) are available to join your travails in the Commonwealth. But there are times – not so many that you want to turn the game off, but enough that you dread the next encounter – when your AI pals fail to retrieve items, move to a position as commanded, hack a computer system, get out of the way while you're having a grenade thrown at you or anything else along those lines. They often become liabilities thanks to their inability to navigate the most simple terrain. And when Dogmeat gets in

FAQs

Q. HOW GLITCHY IS IT?
We saw a lot, but the vast majority had no impact on actually playing the game. Those that did will hopefully be patched out, but crikey they're annoying.

Q. IS IT FUNNY?
Sometimes, and rarely. But this isn't 'random whale falling out of the sky'-style comedy of *Fallout*'s past. Just the odd joke or flourish of silliness here and there.

Q. CAN DOGMEAT DIE?
No, your faithful pooch cannot go to doggie heaven. This will come as great relief to many players, who always fear their dogs will die in games.

Below: The mix of retro and future technology has been a running theme of the *Fallout* series, but the role of the Institute in Boston and the synths running around takes things to a new level.

your way for the 30th time in any given hour, there's a real desire to send that pooch to the farm.

Unfortunately, *Fallout 4*'s failings aren't limited to the expected Bethesda glitches and bugs, instead stretching out into some peculiar design decisions that impact on enjoyment in myriad ways. Take the new conversational system, for example: the full sentence responses written on-screen are gone, replaced with a few words to indicate the gist of what your fully-voiced character will say. Great, just like *Mass Effect*, then? No, because in *Mass Effect* you had a good idea of what your character would *actually* say. In *Fallout 4* you're left second-guessing what these prompts actually mean, worried you'll end up once again making an aggressive comment to a friend, or failing to threaten the man you're trying to extort.

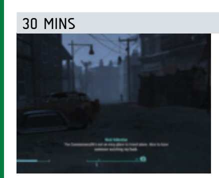
When there's confusion, you lose confidence – and in a game so reliant on its conversational system, that's just not good enough. But you get by – you always get by – and soon enough it's another minor irritation. You make it past the idiosyncrasies and realise that all along you've actually been enjoying it. No major problems are encountered, no game-breaking bugs are on show and even though the frame-rate regularly drops (a fair amount on Xbox One, not so much on PS4 and hardly at all on PC), it hasn't really registered as something to be annoyed about. But in that moment of blissful enjoyment – the way you will feel through the majority of the 60 or so hours it will likely take to play through *Fallout 4* – you come to a startling realisation: you've been shooting *a lot* of things.

For you see, *Fallout 4* has edged a step further away from its post-nuclear RPG lineage. With much better gunplay on show, Bethesda has clearly deemed it necessary to make more missions focused on the act of shooting. Initially it's refreshing, as combat is better than it's been before and so something you want to play about with – but when you sit back and think about it, this isn't how *Fallout* has been for three of the five main games released. *Fallout* has been the game where

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

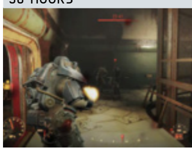
30 MINS



You've lived through a nuclear holocaust – now you just have to get your bearings in this new, rather remodelled, world around you. It takes some time to settle in.

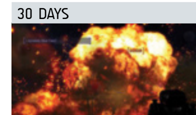


30 HOURS



You know what you're doing, you have favourite weapons and armour, you know what items you need the most for crafting (adhesive), and the faction war is heating up.

30 DAYS



You might return every now and then, but there isn't the drive to come back and try different things like in *New Vegas*. You're hoping the mods situation will fix this.

IT'S A GAME COUNTLESS PLAYERS WILL EASILY PUT DOZENS – HUNDREDS – OF HOURS INTO

SHOTS FIRED

Gunplay has never traditionally been a strong element in *Fallout* – something it owes to its more hardcore RPG roots – but *Fallout 4* goes a long way to fixing this. No longer do you have to rely on VATS and not much else, as the act of simply firing guns in real time is satisfying and – more importantly – works well. While pre-release talk of getting someone in from Bungie to work on the shooting made it sound like we would be looking at *Destiny* levels of weapon handling, that's not the case. But it is a big shift for *Fallout 4* and does open up the game to be played in a different style, something that's always welcome.



Below: Once things really heat up with the different factions, some fantastic battles do occur… and they also take a toll on the engine, with things chugging quite badly at times. Still, sights like this are genuinely interesting and exciting to be a part of.

BETTER THAN

MAD MAX





WORSE THAN

FALLOUT 3



Above: Conversations have removed the potato-faced people of Bethesda's older games and replaced them with human-looking, emotive characters. Still a bit stiff – and conversation options are confusing – but it's one area where the results weigh more on the positive side.

you can go in with an assassination target in mind, only to meet them and switch sides in a discussion. It's been the game where when encountering the last 'boss' character you've talked them down and won with words. It's not a game where you've just solved every problem by shooting at it – at least, not until now. This will sit just fine with those who always wanted *Fallout* to go more in that direction, as well as those unfamiliar with the series' past – but for the *Fallout* purists out there it's a smack in the mouth. Choice is lessened, your impact on the world is defined by the amount of bullets you carry and the cleverness you shared with those creating the game, both marvelling at the depth and complexity of a particular quest's design, is all but gone.

For all that negativity, it's impossible to say *Fallout 4* is a bad game. We wouldn't go anywhere near saying you shouldn't play it or buy it – it's the kind of thing countless players will easily put dozens – hundreds – of hours into. Its systems, while very familiar to *Fallout 3* players, have been tweaked and refined to make them easier to use, while the new additions are generally solid – if not entirely, absolutely necessary. The building/crafting options, for example, work brilliantly in the sense of the game's fiction – but they're really just a sideshow in the game; something you can very easily ignore if you so wish.

It's because of these things that *Fallout 4* is a very good game, but not a great one. *Fallout 3* was great because it was so new and fresh at the time – hindsight highlights its flaws, but at its time it was a true pioneer. *New Vegas* showed the new tech and old sensibilities could be combined in a wonderful (if rather buggy) experience, rich with detail and full of contingencies for almost anything the player thought to do. *Fallout 4* feels more like a *Fallout 3.5*: an improvement on Bethesda's last game but a compromised one that loses some of the core appeal of the series. It might not have wanted to set the world on fire, but Bethesda has lit a flame in our heart. It's just a bit dimmer than we expected it to be.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ROLE-PLAYING: It worked in *Fallout*, *Fallout 2* and *Fallout: New Vegas*, so why Bethesda is so determined to tone down the role-playing aspect we'll never know. Make our choices matter!

VERDICT

VERY GOOD, BUT DOESN'T SET THE WORLD ON FIRE.

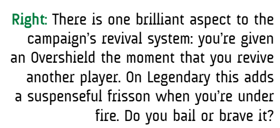
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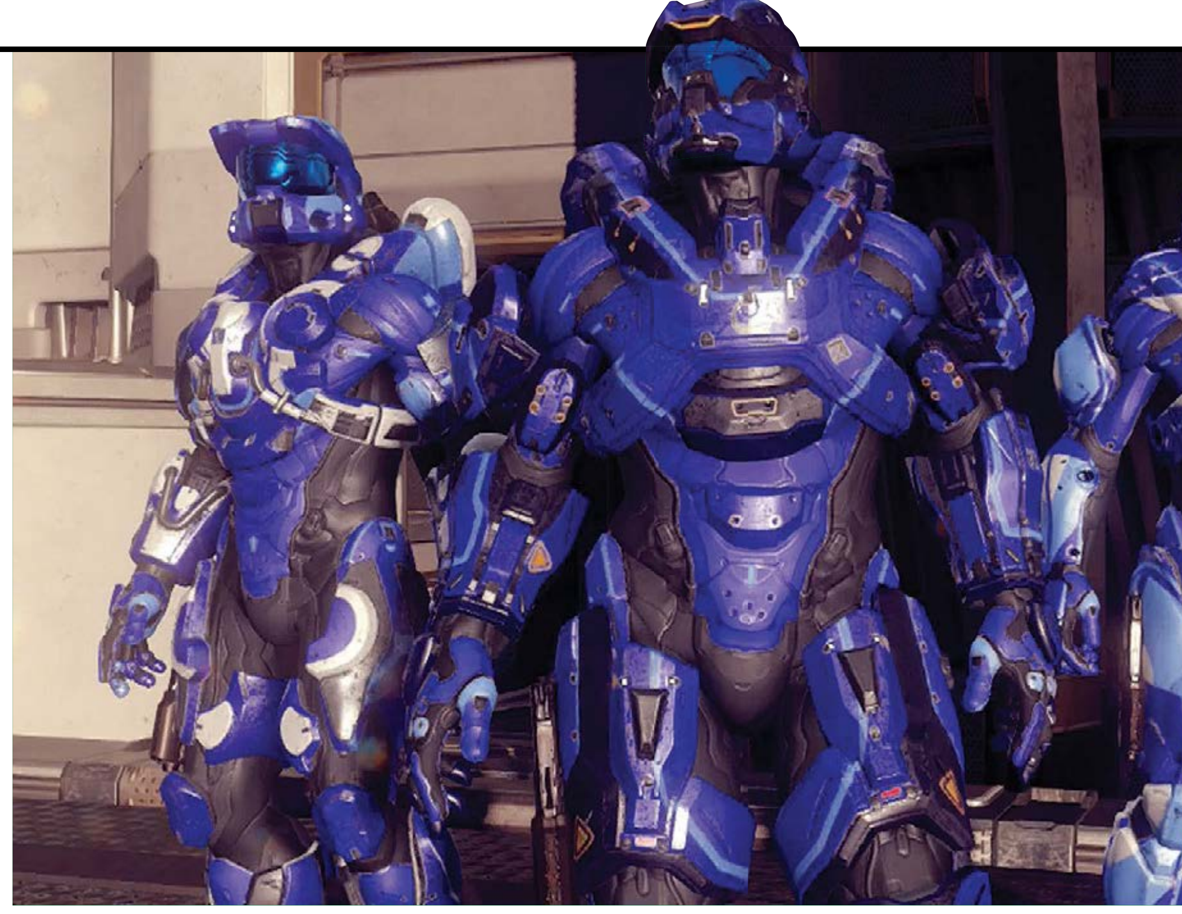
gamesTMmag scored **8** for

Fallout 4

DAMAGE REPORT

Following the shaky release of myriad big-scale first-person shooters and (of course) the calamitous launch of last year's *The Master Chief Collection*, it's only fair to briefly appraise the launch week state of *Halo 5*. While the smaller Arena gametypes work pretty faultlessly, at present empty slots are never re-filled when players leave, and certain maps have a habit of repeating several times once they hit rotation. Matchmaking also kicks in after each and every round, so for example you can't get revenge if you're decimated by a team in the Rush-style Warzone Assault mode. In fact Warzone, like Big Team Battle before it, is prone to the odd crash, but those instances are infrequent. Otherwise, looking good.





Right: There is one brilliant aspect to the campaign's revival system: you're given an Overshield the moment that you revive another player. On Legendary this adds a suspenseful frisson when you're under fire. Do you bail or brave it?



THE HOOP OF MISJUDGMENT

Halo 5: Guardians

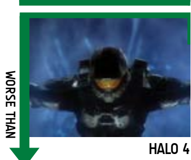
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: 343 Industries
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-24
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

HALO: SPARTAN ASSAULT





HALO 4

WORSE THAN

***Halo 5* claims to contain 15 missions, but there are actually only 12. Missions 4, 9 and 11 only earn their title in the sense that an Achievement pops up when they've been completed.** At around 90 seconds in duration apiece, they each demand that players press X to trigger a conversation or two before the screen slowly fades to black. Even before the realisation arrives that one fifth of this campaign is essentially an illusion, it's already clear that *Halo 5* represents a fairly brutal fall from grace.

Of course, everything is relative, and if the rest of the story mode was filled with captivating gunfights and awe-inspiring setpieces, a white lie about 15 levels wouldn't offend a soul. But *Guardians*' campaign is a muddled and confusing afterthought, and the experience is often downright depressing. *Halo* has always been the most plentiful and consistent package in the FPS arena; it's a series that has bundled essential campaign with essential multiplayer time and time again. But in this era of capped budgets, microtransactions (yes, they're here too) and tokenistic, box-ticking gameplay features, it's perhaps unsurprising to observe how sheepish and safe *Halo 5* feels. What isn't comprehensible is how profoundly it manages to misconstrue its own ancestry.

Bungie's *Halo* games offered up a masterclass in delivering essential visual and aural feedback to players, which is why the combat was often so absorbing. Bizarrely, 343 Industries has chosen to file away at some of the series' core systems, to the extent that prolonged stretches of *Guardians*' campaign feel as if they were modelled on sections from a flagship Activision shooter. And we're not talking about *Destiny*.

Your shield's iconic audio blips, used as near-subconscious shorthand for when to jump in and out of cover, are now drowned out by the rest of the audio. Your energy bar is an inconspicuous sliver that's occasionally borderline invisible during really intense battles, and nowhere near prominent enough in the game's cluttered and intrusive head-up display. That trademark thrill of micromanaging your health, as enemy assailants furiously chip away at it, is completely gone. The situation is exacerbated because the number of things that can kill you instantly – even on Normal difficulty – is exasperatingly high. Cloaked Elites with their insta-kill melee attack are out in force, the (arguably too numerous) bosses all decimate you in a single swipe and one level appears to be partially based around the concept of Grunts appearing from out of nowhere to commit suicide next to you. *Halo* has always been about fighting to stay alive, but *Guardians* is about resigning yourself to relentless and occasionally inexplicable death.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BIGGER RADAR: To accommodate the enhanced speed, Halo's radar range has been reduced from 25 to 16 metres. But as distance is closed faster, shouldn't the range have been increased instead?

To make things worse still, if you play the game alone, you're lumbered with a trio of squadmates whose AI could have been programmed solely to deface Bungie's ground-breaking legacy. When they aren't running after you like discombobulated toddlers, they're completely ignoring you when you're downed, occasionally even sprinting into battle over your still-breathing corpse. When they actually do come to your aid, they're completely blind to their surroundings, and often just queue up to get killed by whatever killed you. What's more, the game's revival system can only work in co-op games in which everyone is communicating, because the head-up display and the audio barely highlight downed players at all, bar the (very) occasional morsel of NPC dialogue, which is often made inaudible by the ongoing pandemonium – like almost every other crucial element of the sound design.

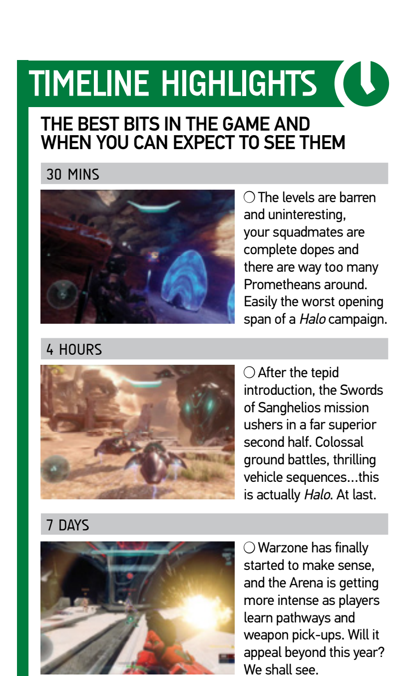
Your three lunk-headed minions aren't even capable of creating a worthwhile distraction.

"HALO HAS ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT FIGHTING TO STAY ALIVE, BUT GUARDIANS IS ABOUT RESIGNING YOURSELF TO RELENTLESS DEATH"

Below: The Custom Game option is no substitute for Forge at present. Vehicle spawns, visual effects and weapon damage can't be modified.



Above: Occasionally during the campaign, you'll come across enemies who don't respond when taking fire. It's hard to complain about this when you're sweating your way through on Legendary, but it's something you would never see in a Bungie game.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS

The levels are barren and uninteresting, your squadmates are complete dopes and there are way too many Prometheans around. Easily the worst opening span of a *Halo* campaign.

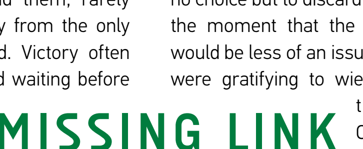
4 HOURS

After the tepid introduction, the Swords of Sanghelios mission ushers in a far superior second half. Colossal ground battles, thrilling vehicle sequences…this is actually *Halo*. At last.

7 DAYS

Warzone has finally started to make sense, and the Arena is getting more intense as players learn pathways and weapon pick-ups. Will it appeal beyond this year? We shall see.

At least three of the game's bosses can only be defeated by being shot in the back, and those bosses only ever focus on you, making this a tiring task. Directing your AI squad's fire towards said boss, even when that fire comes from behind them, rarely distracts their attention away from the only real player on the battlefield. Victory often involves a lot of skulking and waiting before you get a chance to get a few rounds off. After that you just rinse and repeat, ensuring all the while that the excitement doesn't kill you. It's more than clear that *Halo 5*'s campaign has been optimised for co-op play, but playing alone would've been far more entertaining with the co-op systems removed.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BATCH SELL OPTION: Your first few hours playing Warzone nets you hundreds of REQ cards, and while individual cards can be sold, you can't bundle them up for a quicker sale.

For all of its moment-to-moment frustrations though, what sinks *Guardians*' story mode is the fact that it barely qualifies as a *Halo* game at all. Master Chief barely features, and for the first half of the plot, the action is almost entirely restricted to tight corridors and small plains, housing around a dozen enemies at a time. It isn't until the eighth mission that the brassy *Halo* magic of old returns, and players are treated to mad spectacle, strategy-inflected vehicle sequences and levels so vast that the number of available tactical options constantly beggars belief. To say that the second half is superior to the first is an understatement of colossal proportions, but the experience maintains a strange, cover version hollowness even in its most dazzling moments. The outright dearth of ammo, for example, removes your ability to plan ahead, which has been a quintessential trait of *Halo*'s gunplay since day one. You have no choice but to discard almost every weapon the moment that the clip runs dry, which would be less of an issue if all of the weapons were gratifying to wield. The Boltshot and the Incineration Cannon both have their pleasures, but the wimpy and scattershot Suppressor is barely preferable to a kamikaze melee spree. It would certainly be interesting to know how regularly Promethean weapons are picked up and used during multiplayer skirmishes, if at all.

Like practically every other shooter on the market, *Halo* is now all about multiplayer. 343's ambitions for *Guardians* as an eSport were plainly evident during the game's beta cycle, but the studio has been wise to listen to numerous complaints from the fanbase since then. While the beta showcased a game that was a little too fast, the finished article has maintained that uncharacteristic sense of speed but counterbalances it with brisker shield replenishment and gunplay that feels slightly less brutish. As a result, despite its ferocious pace the multiplayer feels genuinely authentic, and once you've acclimatised to the accelerated hustle, the rousing drama of *Halo* materialises with satisfying regularity.

Below: The anarchic Warzone Assault mode is reminiscent of Battlefield's Rush, only you're attacking/defending one base instead of two. It's basically a slaughtering ground that doesn't require much strategy or tactical nous. Good, idiotic fun though.





DEFAULT AND FAULTY

Despite staunch competition from the Covenant Needler and the M6 pistol, Master Chief's assault rifle is the most iconic weapon in the *Halo* universe. Using the rifle to blast away the Covenant and Prometheans in the campaign feels like old times, but at present the weapon is a crock in multiplayer. Despite being part of every player's default load-out, the rifle is utterly feeble at range and only becomes workable when you combine it with a melee charge or two. Most players currently switch automatically to their sidearm upon spawning, but the assault rifle was hugely overpowered in the beta, so a satisfying middle ground is sure to be found shortly.



Left: Solo players are persistently matched with pre-grouped teams of four in multiplayer, which ruined *The Master Chief Collection* for many fans. Why have a ranking system if the playing field isn't level?





Right: The anarchic Warzone Assault mode is reminiscent of *Battlefield*'s Rush, only you're attacking/defending one base instead of two. Crazy but enjoyable.



Left: There's an Achievement for killing a boss during a Warzone match, which can make some skirmishes brilliantly lopsided. Take advantage.

Online play is split between two separate sectors: Arena and Warzone. Arena is comprised of high-intensity 4v4 game-types like Slayer and Capture the Flag, while Warzone is *Halo*'s flagship new mode: an initially baffling blend of *Battlefield*, *League of Legends* and *Titanfall* for up to 24 players. However, Arena doesn't really offer up many surprises, and the visual style of the maps is particularly disappointing. While there are a couple of outliers (the sunset beach of Orion, the bright and uncluttered Coliseum) almost every 4v4 map is a dark, shadowy facility of some kind, replete with a grey and blue colour palette. The design of each environment is exemplary, but it's difficult not to hanker after the glistening green grass of Valhalla or the sun-blasted facade of Sanctuary. The brand new Breakout mode is arguably the highlight of Arena, and offers a round-based game of TDM with no respawns and a flag in the middle of the map, which acts as an alternate route to victory as well as a priceless means of distraction. *Guardians*' future as a lucrative eSport begins here.

Warzone is a different beast altogether, a sprawling mess of borrowed ideas that is actually a good deal of fun once you've realised how it works. Rules and pointers are extremely scarce, so understanding Warzone is a merciless trial by fire that's not for the impatient. It turns out to be quite simple, but the lack of instructions and the messy, confusing player interface do an excellent job of disguising the fact. The Conquest-style clash over a trio of bases reaches endgame when one team captures all three, and the opposing team's shield core is exposed to attack. Until that point, the goal is to get your team to 1,000 points first; by capturing bases, killing enemies (both AI- and player-controlled) and taking out the tenacious Promethean and Covenant bosses that land in the battlefield seemingly at random.

Even more daunting at first is the Requisition system. Requisition packs are periodically rewarded as you play, and contain everything from weapons to vehicles. Once you have, say, a Banshee in your inventory, you have to accumulate the relevant number of Energy Points before you can summon it. Ongoing success means a choice between shelling out for good weapons and perks, or braving the storm until you can afford a potentially game-changing attack vehicle. REQ packs are dispatched to you at a very generous rate from ranks one to 15; whether they slow down once you get beyond that (culminating in a hypothetical situation in which paying cash is your only option for acquiring vital single-use cards) remains to be seen.

Both online and off, *Guardians* handles large-scale action in a confident fashion, with everyday issues like slowdown and audio stutter conspicuous by their absence. There's no doubt that 343's commitment to maintaining a consistent 60fps gives play the urgency it needs, but it isn't difficult to see why Microsoft has relied so heavily on pre-rendered cut scenes and lightning-fast edits during the launch campaign; for a potential system seller, this is one ugly meal ticket. Those obsessed with aesthetics are going to unleash absolute hell on it. With jaggies, retro textures galore and surfaces that are persistently free of detail, there are times in which *Halo 5* looks like a down-scaled, fan-made mod of itself. The decision to stubbornly target gameplay performance over visual clarity was the right one, but youthful Xbox fans for whom the console war still rages on? Prepare to spend the remainder of 2015 with your fingers in your ears.

When 343 added post-match high fives and fist bumps to multiplayer earlier this year, fans were understandably perturbed. Those animations (now removed) implied that the studio didn't wholly understand the property that it was working with, and the final product doesn't even come close to quashing those suspicions. *Halo 5: Guardians* exists only because it had to. It isn't a bad game, it's just a catastrophically uninteresting one.

Above: In Breakout, if you ditch the idea of wiping out the opposing team and instead attempt to capture the flag, be aware that you capture it by taking it to their base, not yours. A very smart way to add tension.

FAQs

Q. THEATRE MODE? FORGE?
Theatre Mode is present and correct at launch, but Forge isn't arriving until the end of this year.

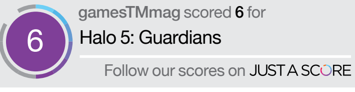
Q. WHERE'S BIG TEAM BATTLE?
Although 343 has pitched Warzone as the evolution of BTB, a traditional BTB mode is expected next year.

Q. THERE'S LAN PLAY RIGHT?
Sadly not. LAN multiplayer and local co-op, two series staples, were both removed due to technical limitations. Next time.

"ONCE YOU'VE ACCLIMATISED TO THE ACCELERATED HUSTLE, THE ROUSING DRAMA OF HALO MATERIALISES"

VERDICT

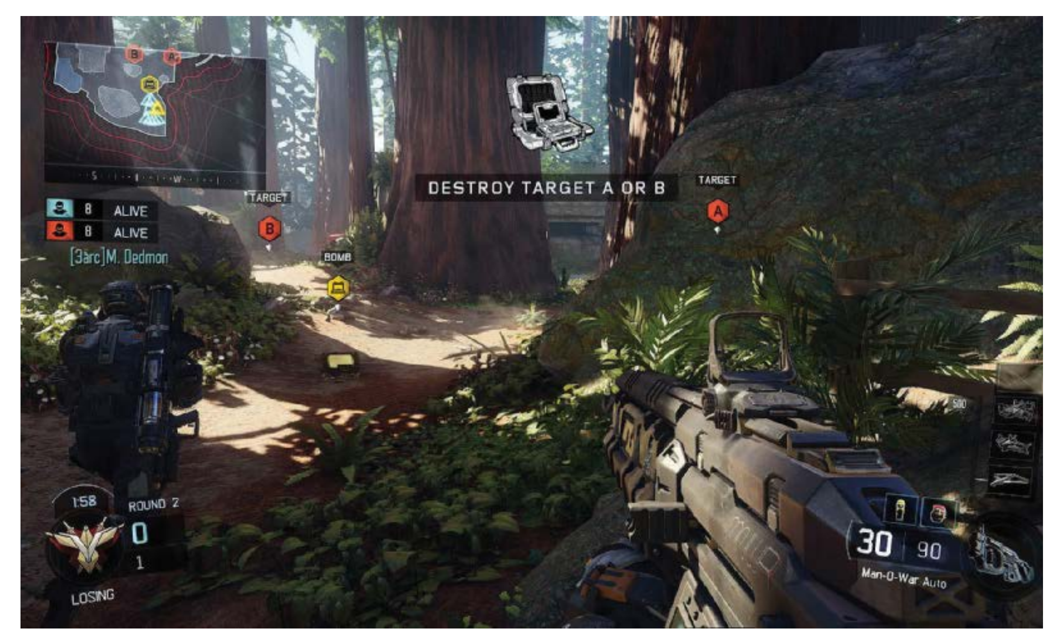
COMPELLING MULTIPLAYER BOLSTERS A SERIES LOW-POINT

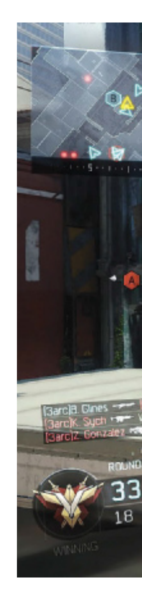


THE NEW ABILITIES MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE SOMETHING OF A CROSS BETWEEN A SPIDER AND A GRASSHOPPER

BEST MULTIPLAYER MAP?

This is, of course, subjective, but the Redwood map is a definite contender for the best map crown. Like the rest of the maps it's far from large, but it does harbour a number of different routes and a central area made up of different vantage points overlooking an open space. Further, it's also one of the better locales for making the most of your ability to sprint along walls. If you time it right, and you've the necessary skill, it's possible to wall run along a specific route and catch your opponents very much off guard. Don't expect such tricks to work for long in the online space, though…





ALL-OUT ACTION, AND THEN SOME…

Call Of Duty: Black Ops III

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Treyarch
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (2-16 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Left: All of the expected multiplayer game modes return largely untouched, although the ability to run across walls and double-jump to previously impossible heights and across enormous gaps means that familiar rules play very differently.

Treyarch's vision of *Call Of Duty* has always been more fantastical than other studios' take on the franchise. Therefore, it comes as little surprise that the Californian outfit has taken it upon itself to deliver what is arguably the most disruptive new element *Call Of Duty*'s main event of online multiplayer has ever seen.

As you might imagine, the ability to run across walls like you're a parkouring cyborg changes enormously the way you view and interpret the environment around you. No longer does that gap represent an impasse. No longer does storming a well-guarded room or building mean going in through the ground floor. No longer does navigating a dangerous corner mean crawling on your belly. Now, you can opt to take the dramatic route and use walls as launch pads for spectacular attacks.

The ability to catch an enemy unawares has long been vital to a successful career within *COD*'s online realm, with wall-running enormously expanding your options for achieving exactly that. Until the community has become versed in what can and can't be achieved with this new ability, you can expect plenty of moments of surprise and frustration as players struggle to work out what has just happened, how they might counter it and how they might go about implementing the trick for themselves.

And that's not the only new means of traversal you need worry about and master. Double-jumping via the use of thrusters strapped to your back allows you to reach higher ledges than ever before, as well as cross expansive horizontal gaps. Oh, and you can also swim underwater for as long as your oxygen quota allows. In short, there are plenty of new ways to work out unusual positions and dream up previously impossible strategies.

However, welcome as new ideas always are, the specific blend opted for here brings with it a tendency to make you feel as though you're something of a cross between a spider and a grasshopper. That might well be the point given that this is the most genuinely futuristic of any *COD* in recent memory, with Treyarch looking to find ways to make you feel like every bit the super-soldier that you're supposed to be. The ultimate result of the spider/grasshopper combo, though, is that things feel less diverse than they have in the past.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

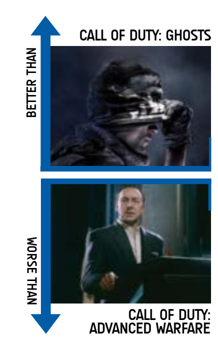
SPECIALISTS: Before you even begin to think about your loadout options you must select a Specialist, each coming with their own special ability that has the potential to alter how you play.

Given the potential for wildly executed manoeuvres and parkour-like showboating, matches typically play out at a frantic pace. Depending on the game mode there does, obviously, exist the option of sitting back and waiting for an unsuspecting foe to cross your path – but to do so makes you feel as though you're playing a different game from everyone else as you see and hear signs of frantic jumping, wall-running and firefights all around you.

There has probably never been a *COD* release that shuns the art of quiet, patient, disciplined use of the sniper rifle, or longer-range assault rifle, as much as this one. One of the best indicators of this is the design of the sniper rifles themselves, many of them seemingly designed for quick-scoping rather than true sniping. While you can't argue against the sheer excitement offered by this year's changes, you also can't help but mourn the fact that this is a series becoming ever more obsessed with providing instant, continuous action. This kind of frenetic pace is exhilarating for those first hours, but it doesn't take long to recognise that many of the playing styles of the past have been made redundant. Simply, there are fewer distinct routes to success.

Not that this takes away from the routes that *are* here, it's just that you need to be a player of a certain mindset to appreciate and embrace the changes. There's little doubt that those of an all-action persuasion are going to

Above: The 11-mission campaign is set across a handful of countries across the world, including Singapore, Switzerland and Ethiopia.



Left: FreeRun courses are designed to allow you to practise the new abilities before you step into online multiplayer. Be warned: the last of the four courses is extremely difficult to complete without any faults.

adore the sensational new talents, with the most creative becoming the envy and the leaders of the online population. That desire for a consistently high pace is further evidenced by the design of the maps, with small rooms featuring multiple breach points and flanked by interconnecting corridors and courtyards being the order of the day. While medium range sight lines exist on a selection of them, there is an almost complete void of the longest sort and there are very few (if any) spots that can be intelligently defended without the combined effort of your entire squad.

Again, this forces the action, as you're forever in a state of paranoia as you worry that you're about to be snuck up upon and assassinated from behind. Better to stay on the move and die shooting than hunkering down and getting blindsided. With the introduction of wall-running and thruster-jumping you're not even safe from aerial attacks, giving you an extra dimension to cover and defend against. In small part, how you approach online games is dictated by your choice of 'specialist'. Who you select alters your appearance – from sleek ninja-like assassins to muscle-bound predictables and full-on robots – but more importantly it affects which special ability you're awarded.

As you play, your special ability slowly charges over time until you're given the choice to deploy it. Once deployed you must wait for it to recharge, so don't expect to be able to rely on it as a means to consistently come out on top. These abilities can, however, be devastatingly effective when used and, furthermore, are pleasingly varied in their operation given that not all of them are based simply around bolstering your firepower. Each Specialist has two abilities to choose from, although only one can be taken into a given match.

Nomad, for instance, offers either a gun that shoots death-dealing proximity mines and a regeneration option that allows him to instantly respawn at the exact location of your death. The latter is phenomenally satisfying should you manage to respawn and kill your attacker. For that same attacker, though, there's nothing in the game that's more frustrating. Elsewhere, Spectre can opt for a blade kit that provides extended melee reach or an active camouflage that makes him largely invisible for a short period. Outrider comes with a radar-like pulse that highlights any enemies around her (including through walls) and a bow that fires arrows that explode on contact. Battery packs a bouncing grenade launcher or powerful armour that protects against everything but headshots and explosives.

Obviously, it pays to construct your loadout in such a way that it compliments your special ability. If you select Outrider's pulse system then you're probably going to want to set her up with perks and weapons that facilitate an ability to sneak up on your unsuspecting foes. Or, if you really do want to try your hand at long-distance sniping, you'd be better off choosing something other than Spectre's improved melee attack.

As far as game modes go there's a lot less to learn for *COD* veterans. All of the staple modes return – Team Deathmatch, Capture the Flag, Search and Destroy, Domination, et al – as does the often criminally overlooked Hardcore mode option. The new edition, Safeguard, is, unfortunately, one of the least interesting and more frustrating options. Clearly inspired by the success of the MOBA genre, Safeguard sees one team try to guide an AI-controlled robot across the map to a designated objective point within a given time limit. In the next round the roles are reversed and the defenders become the attackers.

Safeguard is, once again, representative of *Black Ops III*'s desire to force the action at all times, with the robot becoming the focal point for every player. The result is that combat tends to take place within a tiny section of the already small maps, leading to regular barrages of grenades and other explosives littering the area. If you're part of a well-oiled team then there's potential for advanced tactics, but such dreams are unlikely to come to fruition in the public matchmaking arena.

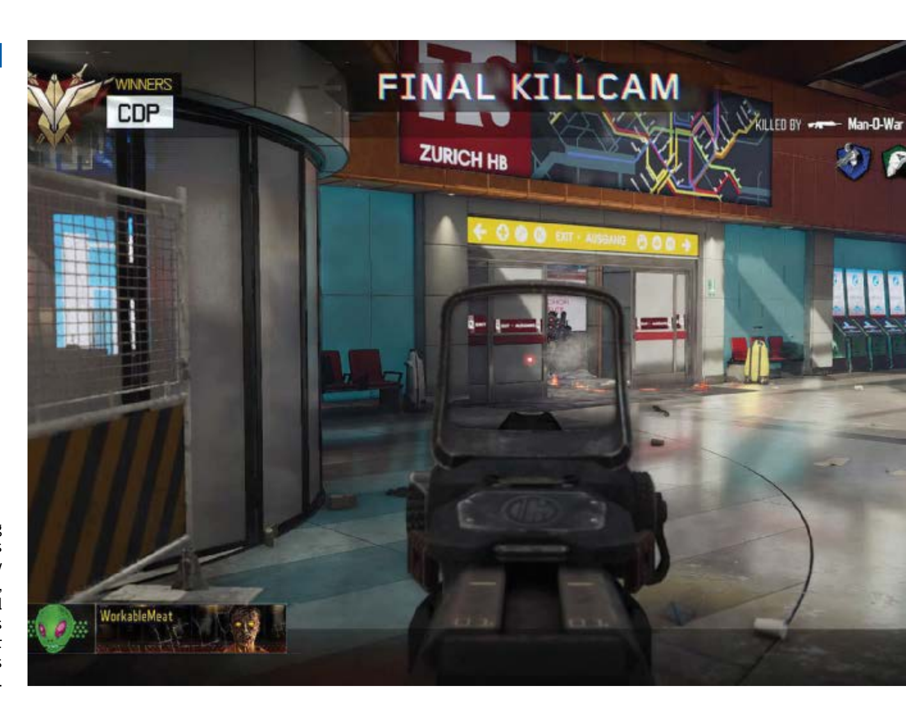
For those not interested in the staunchly cut-throat world of *Black Ops III*'s competitive multiplayer offerings, there exists co-op and

FAQs

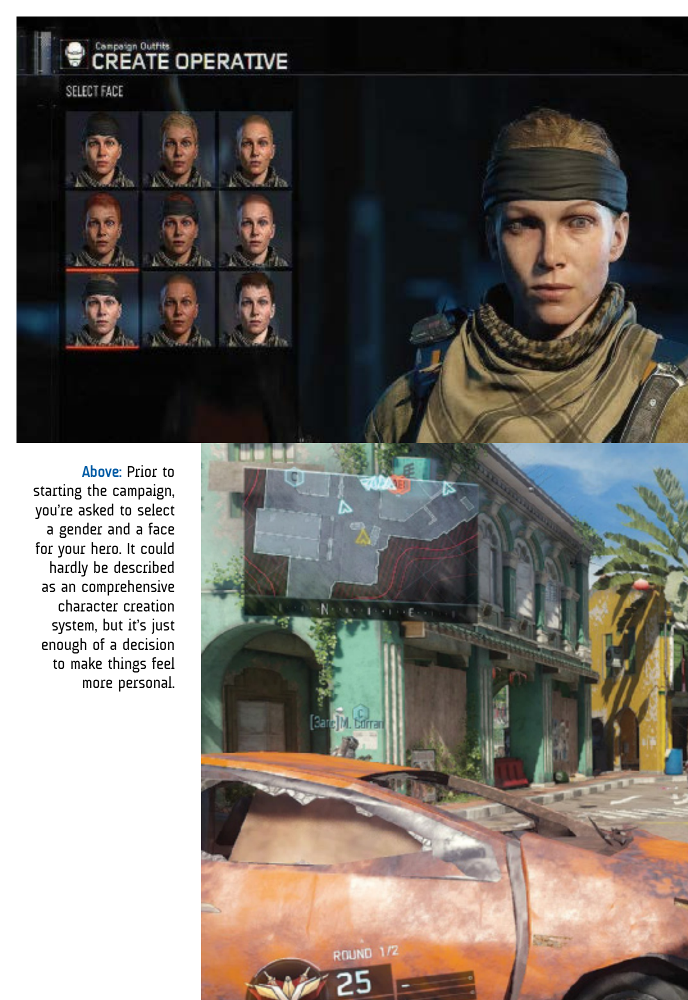
Q. LOCAL MULTIPLAYER OPTIONS?
The campaign can be played split screen, and various local options exist for multiplayer modes. Additionally, you can play against bots.

Q. AN ALL-STAR CAST?
Ron Perlman, Heather Graham, Neal McDonough and Jeff Goldblum provide the voices for Zombies mode.

Q. 'QUICK-SCOPING' OPTIONS EXIST?
Yes, and there are sniper rifles that seem to have been designed for exactly that purpose. Expect a lot of it online.

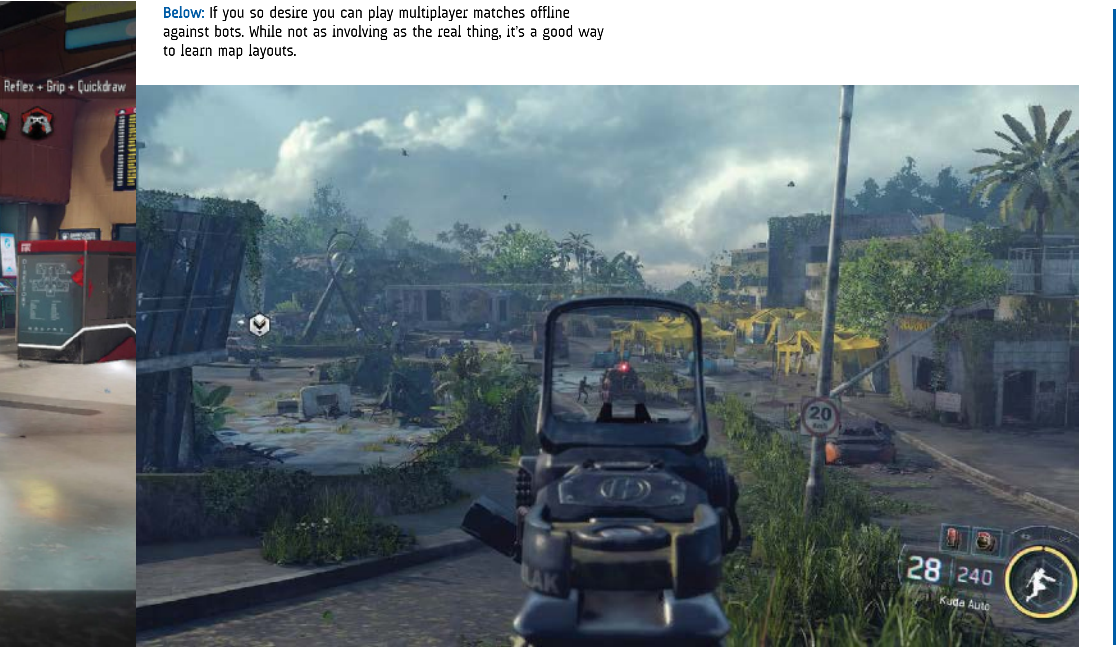


Right: It's tempting to simply focus on killing as many zombies as possible, but the real challenge of Zombies mode is to uncover all of a map's hidden secrets.



Above: Prior to starting the campaign, you're asked to select a gender and a face for your hero. It could hardly be described as an comprehensive character creation system, but it's just enough of a decision to make things feel more personal.

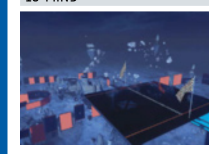
Below: If you so desire you can play multiplayer matches offline against bots. While not as involving as the real thing, it's a good way to learn map layouts.





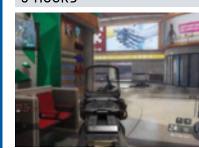
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS



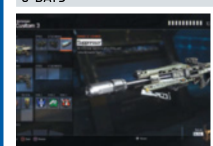
Learning how to properly use the wall-running and double jump features by completing the four Freerun courses. Mastering the nuances of the abilities is essential, not optional.

6 HOURS



Very deep into the campaign now, looking to polish it off as quickly as possible in order to tick the box and move onto the main event that is competitive online multiplayer.

3 DAYS



With numerous loadout options unlocked, now is the time to really start nailing down what kind of equipment and approach you want to take into online matches. It's a brutal world out there.

PLAYING OUT OF ORDER

Whilst it's not explicitly stated from the outset, you're free to play through the campaign missions in any order you so desire. All you need to do is scroll down to a mission you've yet to unlock and you'll be asked if you want to open up all missions. Playing missions out of order makes it even more unlikely that you're going to understand what is already an incredibly convoluted and muddled narrative, but it's more than welcome when you consider that playing in four-person co-op is the superior way to experience what's on offer. Not being beholden to your personal progression means that you can jump in with friends tackling a mission you've not completed, facilitating a social approach that more games of this kind could learn from.

single-player options. Treyarch's trademark Zombies mode returns with support for up to four players, the team working together to survive as many enemy waves as possible whilst simultaneously trying to uncover a level's secrets.

Zombies represents a significant challenge, with success coming only through sheer bloody-mindedness. Tackling the waves of zombies is easy to understand yet difficult to execute once their numbers and diversity start ramping up, while working out the location of hidden items required to solve puzzles is legitimately challenging. After a while, the solutions are sure to find a home online, so if your frustration levels grow too overwhelming you can always opt for that option. Then there's the campaign, which is a decidedly mixed bag of the engaging and the idiotic. As far as the narrative is concerned, events embrace the absurd to a degree that even past *COD*'s have come nowhere near to reaching. What's worse is that Treyarch clearly thinks that what's here is something other than B-movie convolution of the least charming kind.

Tomes of optional text exist for you to read in an attempt to flesh out a narrative that only serves to further undermine the videogame medium's attempts at telling a worthwhile story. While it's true that putting your reading glasses on and consuming these chapters does improve your understanding of what's going on, they're far from interesting or worthwhile in the grand scheme of things.

The good of the campaign is that you can play in four-player co-op. While your enjoyment here is going to be directly influenced by who you're playing with, the concept is executed brilliantly and it's far and away the best way to experience events. The best advice here is to ignore the story entirely and focus purely on succeeding as a team to the very best of your combined abilities. Once all of the campaign missions are finished, you unlock a second campaign that uses the same missions but rearranges them and rewrites the cutscenes to tell an even sillier story revolving around a zombie outbreak. This yarn is far more intriguing than the main campaign simply because it doesn't pretend to be something that it's not.

As ever, then, *COD* is a mixed bag. There's plenty to do, but you can't rid yourself of the feeling that there has never been a release in this franchise more dedicated to a certain kind of player. If you're part of that crowd, rest assured that you're going to wholly entertained. Everyone else might want to think twice.

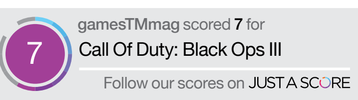
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MODES: There simply aren't enough new multiplayer modes. While the existing catalogue is functional, it's impossible to mask the disappointment at the fact that only one new option, Safeguard, exists.

VERDICT

DECENT EFFORT, BUT FAR FROM COD MASTERY



A GENUINE REBOOT OR A SIGN THE SERIES HAS BURNT OUT?

Need For Speed

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Ghost Games
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

What a horrible task it must be to reboot a racing franchise. The likes of shooters have it easy with a fairly simple and prescribed goal: make it dark and gritty, make it an origin story – thanks Christopher Nolan. But when it comes to a racing game, what exactly are you resetting? The objective is still going to be to drive through a series of checkpoints as quickly as possible, that's never going to change. For Ghost Games, its *Need For Speed* reboot is about setting the tone for the name; about giving a showcase for players to know what those three recognisable words actually mean; about denoting the type of experience you'll have before you've even put the disc in the drive.

The focus here is on urban car culture, an emphasis on the street racer lifestyle and all that it entails: high-speed police chases, pridefully modifying your ride and streaking down lamp-lit city streets as fast as your four wheels will take you. It's a smart move; *Underground* has long been revered as the pinnacle of the series and by recreating that vibe it's somehow given the game a sense of freshness. You're not avenging the death of your brother or an undercover cop wronged by the corrupt side of the law, you're just a guy with a love of cars, a desire for driving and a fondness for others that share those feelings. Your chosen home is Ventura Bay, a faux-LA location seen almost entirely in the darkness of night – and it's gorgeous. While the cars are rendered realistically, there's a great level of style heaped onto the world: lights are brighter than they should be, reflections in the permanently rain-slicked roads are impossibly clear and there's a strong use of film grain and depth of field. It's heavy-handed but beautiful, and makes for a very cinematic experience.

Tying into this is the game's narrative and characters, and it's here that this *Need For Speed* reboot falters. The cut scenes are live action, shot from first-person to give the sense that you are the unnamed racer, and this in itself is quite effective. The scenes aren't jarring at all, spliced as they are with computer-generated renders of your cars to fully immerse you into the atmosphere of the game. Sadly, it's the characters that are a more than a little tiresome, feeling less

Right: The scoring for the drift events is erratic. Sometimes you'll score more points for a quick drift mid-straight than a full slide around a long bend. Crashing can negate points earned, but again it's obtuse – some large collisions pass by just fine while small shunts can cancel perfect drifts.

Below: There are enough options that you can create a design that is both unique and something you're happy with, but not so many that *Forza* should be worried.



Below: The Frostbite engine is really showing off with this *NFS*, but Ghost Games has used a bunch of cinematic effects to make it a visual treat.

Below: The drift train events ask you to drift as part of a group to score points, but it seems no one else is on the same page and the AI are rarely found together as a pack.



THIS IS AN OPEN WORLD GAME ABOUT STREET RACERS, BUT WHERE ARE THE IMPROMPTU DRAG RACES AND THE EMERGENT TASKS?



Above: The use of live action video is good – it's the only time you get any personality out of the game. Unfortunately, those personalities use words like 'jelly' (jealous) and fist bump far more than is healthy.



CAR MECHANICS

It's possible to fine tune each car's handling, allowing you to set your preferred play style – are you a drifter or a braker? But there are just so many drift events that you'd be better off learning to drift rather than regularly travelling back to your garage just to switch the options. The handling mechanics are strange, too; on the one hand it's pretty fun to swing the rear end out and perfect a slide around a long bend, but on the other there's no real sense of speed to anything. You'll happily reach 120 miles per hour without even realising, and feel like you're still waiting to kick in the third gear. This is made all the worse by the irritating rubberbanding, which has AI zip past you when you are nearing the end of a race.



like *Fast And The Furious* and more *Gone In 60 Seconds*. They call to invite you to a race, they call after a race, they call during a race. They'll even get in touch to remind you that you haven't yet turned up, even when you've been busy completing other events. As characters they're painful, the sort of obnoxious youths you'd expect to see created in the boardroom of a thirty-something EA executive, but as proponents of the game's challenges, they are a chore. Worse still, outside of these short clips you get no sense of this mythical car culture that they're constantly referring to. Each of the five characters represent one of five distinct ways to play – drifting, speeding, building, crew-racing and cop-evading – but all it does is culminate in an uncomfortable piety as these characters *constantly* recite the names of the reputed real-life stars the game has included, the most notable being Ken Block. The streets themselves are practically empty, and even the race events themselves start with you turning up – all alone – to a marker on the road. No parked up, tricked-out Subarus, no beats blaring out of heavily-augmented sound systems, no one. If Ghost Games really wanted to recreate the sensation of living the urban racer lifestyle it needed *a lot* more within the actual world instead of just a handful of videos with exaggerated characters worshipping the names of racing celebrities.

FAQs

Q. IS IT LONG?
Roughly ten to 12 hours, depending on how much time you want to spend tinkering with your car's customisation.

Q. AND HOW IS THAT?
It's by no means as vast or intricate as *Forza*'s, but there are enough options to stamp a personal touch onto your car.

Q. WHAT ABOUT VISUAL MODS?
Outside of the initial starter cars, the majority of unlockable vehicles are severely limited in terms of visual additions to your car.

BETTER THAN — NEED FOR SPEED: THE RUN



WORSE THAN — BURNOUT PARADISE

The events you'll take on suffer a similar lack of imagination, too. Ultimately, you're racing from point A to point B, sometimes racing against the clock, other times focusing on drifting. Another type of race asks that you stay bunched up as part of a crew to score points. The Outlaw missions offer some twists by often testing your resolve against the police, usually with specific objectives – such as reaching a certain pursuit length and the like – but even these only offer a glimpse at what could have been. This is an open world game about street racers, but where are the impromptu drag races and the emergent tasks such as personally tracking down the best gymkhana spots or fastest routes? Where are the destructible collectibles, stunt jumps and such? It's not *Burnout* – no one thought it would be – but *Need For Speed*'s open world feels wasted in the context of its underground setting. There's little to see in this world, outside of the visuals; it may as well have been a linear set of events selected from a menu for all the time you'll spend tediously travelling to another nondescript race.

Mechanically the game is a little too weighty as well, with that ever important sense of speed – it's in the name, remember – failing to appear with or without nitrous until you've got a car capable of shifting 160 miles per hour or more. Yet most frustrating of all is the rubberbanding, which has you leading a race for its entirety only to be overtaken at the last possible second by an inexplicable burst of speed from the AI. Argue that they have nitrous, perhaps, suggest upgrading your car's insides even, but if this was the case you wouldn't be out in front in the first place. It's simply a poorly designed means of forcing you into the game's cyclical upgrade path, and creates a very unfair, infuriating, and arbitrary difficulty. Ultimately, this new *Need For Speed* has rebooted nothing; it's an open world racer the likes of which we've already seen many times last-gen, but when the mechanics themselves fall short – well, that's not a message any new start wants to begin with.

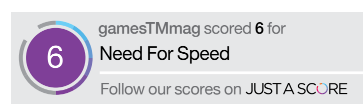
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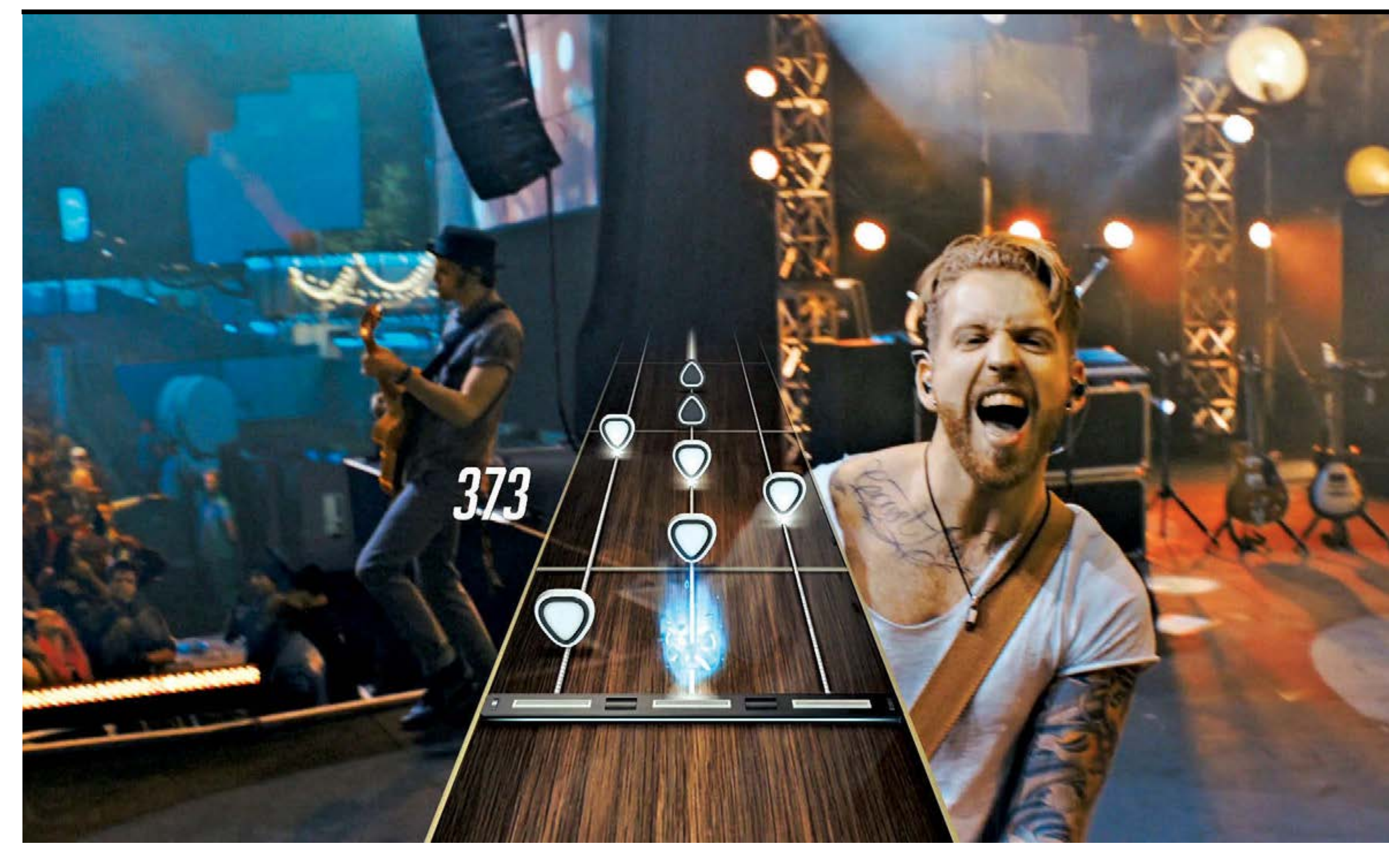
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TAKE TO THE STREETS: Ghost Games was right to focus on *Underground*'s street racer vibe, but without gameplay to match that atmosphere it has ended up feeling a little flat and under-developed.

VERDICT

NEITHER FAST NOR FURIOUS





Above: The game looks amazing thanks to the tech used to film it: 4K Red cameras and digital lighting by Framestore, the same Oscar-winning VFX studio behind *Gravity* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* will do that for you, though.

IT STRUCK A CHORD WITH US

Guitar Hero Live

This isn't the *Guitar Hero* you remember. This isn't the *Guitar Hero* that was butting heads year on year with *Rock Band*. This isn't the *Guitar Hero* that would likely have faded into the background against Harmonix's genre rival this year, in a marketplace that – despite a five year absence – still manages to feel somewhat tired. No, this is new. This is the shot in the arm the peripheral-based rhythm action game needed, and it's all presented so well.

From the second you boot the game up and you're given a tutorial from a roadie who wants to talk you through the guitar controls, to the hours you'll spend ripping your fingers apart on System Of A Down's *Chop Suey* on Expert, *Guitar Hero Live* never feels old. It's a slick experience that's been crafted with love, and there are a lot of good ideas hiding behind the simple UI and oddly stripped-back game menu.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, Xbox 360, PS3, iOS, Wii U
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: FreeStyle Games
PRICE: £64.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (1-10 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

But what do you really need from a rhythm action game, outside of note lanes and charting? As FreeStyle Games proves, very little – the majority of the navigation can be done by hitting a dial on the bottom of the new guitar, and the game is handily broken into two distinct segments: the single-player only Live portion, and the multiplayer-friendly, score-attacking GHTV mode.

Live is where the most work has gone in – and is where the scale of what FreeStyle has pulled off comes into its own: standing up on stage, strumming along to anything from Katy Perry to Fall Out Boy while watching the crowd go nuts is a whole new take on the rockstar fantasy these games market themselves on, and the interactions you have with your bandmates are so believable and nuanced that it makes up for the hilarious acting you sometimes witness. That's not a bad thing, though – this game has got a *personality* and it's not ashamed of it. You're standing in your front room clacking away on a plastic guitar, and it wants you to be proud of that. It stands shoulder to shoulder with you, intent on being as cheesy as you are. It's taken some stick for not delivering a more genuine/serious rockstar experience, but we love it.

LIVE MODE STANDS SHOULDER TO SHOULDER WITH YOU, INTENT ON BEING AS CHEESY AS YOU ARE

Then there's GHTV: a mode that really taps into the party aspect of the *Guitar Hero* games. You don't download any of the tracks you play here – they're all streamed directly to your console – and this has garnered some criticism in various sectors of the industry.

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE TRACKLIST LIKE?
Varied, interesting and containing quite a few obscure gems, this living setlist is an interesting mix of genre and age.

Q. DO THE IAPS RUIN IT?
Not in the slightest – you don't even need to visit the store once in order to get the full experience. And that includes the 'premium' early access songs.

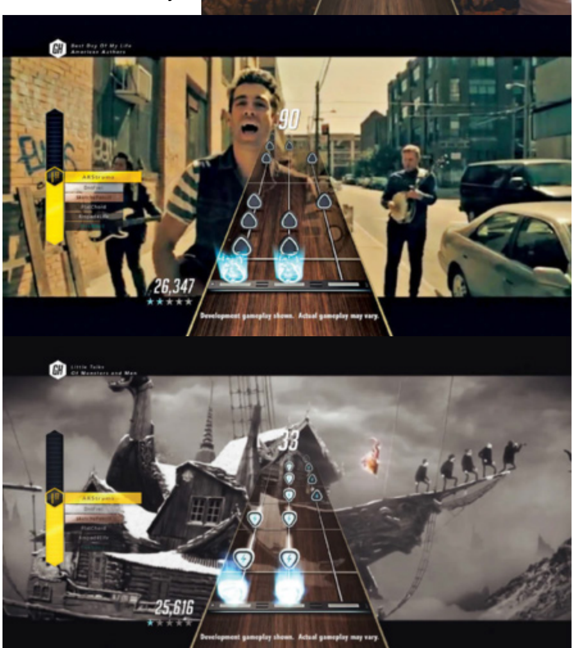
Q. HOW HARD IS EXPERT?
Incredibly hard: learning all the new chord patterns and shapes as well as finger placements is a killer, but it's great fun and a new challenge.



Right: Our favourite thing to do during the downtime while you're on stage is to look for that one gig-goer that clearly isn't enjoying themselves. Keep an eye out – you'll spot them.

Right: The UI is slick and immediately understandable – the charting system made us feel instantly comfortable with the game's rules.

Below: The GHTV channels are themed, ranging from pop to rock to metal. These are varied by FreeStyle depending on the time of day.



The way we see it though, it is beneficial for you *and* FreeStyle: you're never forced to spend your own money, you'll never buy any music that'll be mysteriously taken away thanks to the dubious nature of music licensing, and you save space on your hard-drive. The catch? There's an IAP element to the game, where you can buy 'plays' to select the music you want from the rapidly expanding setlist.

Except, it's not really a catch. Because we haven't yet spent a penny on these IAPs, and we've been playing *a lot* of GHTV. You're gifted these 'play' tokens when you level up, or when you complete specific tasks, and you'll easily unlock these at regular enough intervals for the real-world money option to be inconsequential to you. And if you do run out of tokens, just jump onto the GHTV channels – they're scheduled just like real music TV channels (think Kerrang!, think MTV2) and you can play along live to music videos while a sharp, minimalist totem displays your score against up to ten other people. It brings out your competitive spirit, and it's completely non-intrusive. It's a fantastic bit of rethinking from FreeStyle on how a game like this should approach multiplayer.

But how does it actually play? Well, that's where we've got a slight issue – the charts are fun, and the new six-button system is genuinely more comfortable to manoeuvre than previous models. It mimics how a guitar is actually played: we found ourselves making finger shapes that we'd make for real barre chords or power chords. Hammer-ons and pull-offs are back, and work surprisingly well within the pop-leaning tracks on the game's tracklist. Mixing in same line combinations with barre chords, single notes and open notes makes for some charts that are really fun to play. However, unless you're playing on anything other than Expert, you'll be subject to some rather odd charting choices – we noticed a lot of songs inexplicably make you play the off beat, which can really throw you if you're familiar with the song. Advanced charts sometimes replace four-note bars with triplets, bafflingly, so you're arguing with yourself about listening to the song or watching the note highway. Expert mode – where you play every note – and Regular mode are fine, though.

Guitar Hero Live has been carefully constructed, but like its direct opponent (*Rock Band*), what's been released here is a proof of concept – a foundation that future patches and updates will build on. What comes in the box is a lot stronger than the opposition, though, and promises to only get stronger thanks to the pay-if-you-want funding model running in the background.

In the meantime, between a clever mixture of single-player only score-chasing, fun co-op modes, light karaoke functionality, and a levelling-up system that's incremental and actually pushes you out of your comfort zone, this is a game that repairs all the wrongs the peripheral-based rhythm action genre fell foul to last gen. The six-button system on the guitar feels intuitive and natural, the charting - whilst occasionally bemusing - is agreeable, and the living content roster is inspired. FreeStyle, basically, hit all the right notes this time.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CROWD SOURCE: The live action segments of *Guitar Hero Live* can seem a bit awkward, but largely they're incredibly fun, and offer something really different for the genre.

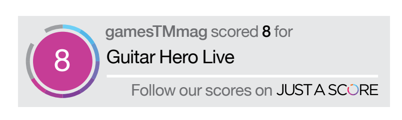
NO SMALL FRET

Guitar Hero's amazing on-disc offering is held back by the unfortunate state of the hardware. Where *Rock Band*'s instruments are solid and uncompromising, the *Guitar Hero* instruments are unreliable. Between ourselves and our two sister magazines (Play and X-ONE), we've tested six guitars – and half of them have faults: the upstrum on one doesn't always register, while alternate strumming on another causes detection issues in-game. The devices also seem to suffer from Bluetooth cross-talk – that is, they interfere with each other at times. This rarely impacts the game, but it can lead to moments of frustration.



VERDICT

THE GUITAR HERO FOR PEOPLE WHO GOT BORED OF GUITAR HERO



A MIGHTY ADVENTURE

Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 1: The Order Of The Stone

***Minecraft: Story Mode* is another triumph for Telltale Games, and it's a surprising one.** It should never have worked, which is essentially the unofficial company line for Telltale. The studio takes concepts you could never imagine being draped over its aging adventure game skeleton, and transforms the covered bones into episodic gold dust. As it turns out, Mojang's galactically popular sandbox game was the perfect candidate for Telltale's magic touch.

Despite *Minecraft* never having anything even slightly resembling a story – it built its success entirely off letting players craft their own stories through innovative play – Telltale proves that it is finally comfortable returning to its carefree comedy roots. *Minecraft: Story Mode* is a grand adventure in a familiar world; a well constructed homage to the unearthly beauty of *Minecraft*'s wondrous blocky design.

Within two hours you'll be sold on the idea that *Minecraft* has always been missing a narrative. A cast of lovable characters, a goofy villain and some family friendly stakes – that draw lovingly from the likes of *The Goonies* as much as *Scooby Doo* – were all that it would have taken Mojang apparently. But that isn't giving Telltale enough credit. The writing is pitch perfect; there's a handful of genuinely laugh out loud moments to be had, even if you aren't a giant fan of *Minecraft*, and the sense of cartoon-peril is well paced.

DETAILS

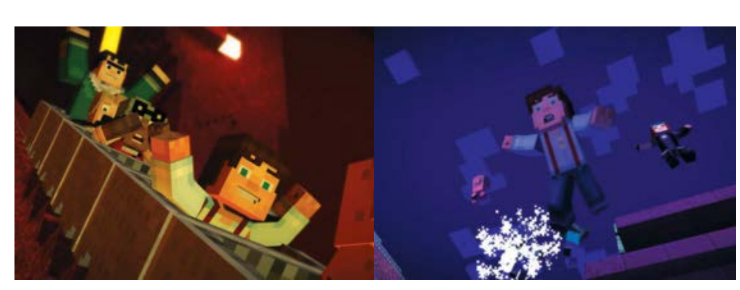
FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PS3,, PS Vita, Wii U, Xbox 360, Android, iOS, PC,
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £5.19
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN THE WOLF AMONG US



WORSE THAN THE WALKING DEAD





But just like every Telltale game, it doesn't take long for that decaying skeleton to expose itself like a Creeper at an EnderCon party. Within the safe confines of dialogue selections and QTEs, *Minecraft: Story Mode* handles itself just fine. Outside of button prompts, however, and the frustration begins to seep in. Timing-based combat is resoundingly terrible, with the stilted controls forcing you to mash the controls faster than you might at a Redstone Ore vein.

It's a great shame, because Telltale has actually performed a stroke of genius within *The Order Of The Stone*, twisting the familiar Telltale gameplay tropes to include a simplified version of *Minecraft*'s original crafting system. It gives players a way to express themselves, like it did when it first debuted, with whatever materials they can get their hands on – and the potential for this during action setpieces moving forward is immensely exciting.

When *The Order Of The Stone* draws to a close, you'll be desperate to continue the adventure. Everything about it feels lovingly crafted, with Telltale introducing some heart into the blocky wasteland of Mojang's creation. This is one of the strongest debuts we've ever seen from Telltale, it's just such a shame that rickety game engine doesn't match its innovative ambitions.

FINGERPRINT

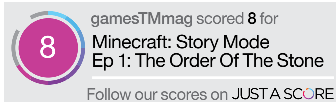
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CRAFTING TABLE: Telltale managed to merge narrative with crafting, something we didn't think possible, and its execution is ingenious.



VERDICT

FOR BETTER AND WORSE, IT'S CLASSIC TELLTALE





Above: Whether you're a *Minecraft* lover or a disinterested hater, Telltale has found a way to satisfy fans of the crafting world and lovers of grand adventures; there's something for everybody to enjoy here, kids and adults alike.



BROKEN HOOP DREAMS

NBA Live 16





Above: When static, the visual quality meets our expectations of what a new-gen game should look like in 2015. As soon as things start moving, however, lacklustre animations and visual inconsistencies undermine what might have been impressive presentation.

You have to take your hat off to EA Sports, it knows how to take a beating. Every year a new *NBA Live* is released, and every year it's beaten to a pulp by critics and basketball fans alike. But despite suffering what must be chronic bruising and shattered ego, the releases keep on coming. One day, surely, the tough lessons will result in a genuine alternative to 2K's NBA outings. Right?

Unfortunately, although wholly unsurprisingly, that day isn't today. If you simply want to work out which of the year's NBA releases is best to invest in then you can stop reading now and grab a copy of *NBA 2K16*. While there are a few interesting ideas on offer here, the gulf in quality between the two contenders represents one of the biggest mismatches found anywhere in videogames.

For every upgrade on last year's *NBA Live* there exists painful gaps that are too obvious to ignore. Attacking AI is much better at working high-percentage scoring opportunities and even adapts to changes in approach you make, but unresponsive controls and terrible animations undermine any incentive you have to overcome a quality attack.

As a general rule, if you're planning on mastering a defensive gameplan then you're going to come unstuck. Seemingly in an attempt to make things more exciting and entice new players into the fold, everything is weighted so heavily in favour of offensive players that it's tempting to just put the controller down whenever you're not in possession and wait for your opponent to score before engaging again. Fair and even-handed gameplay is crucial for a sports game, with *NBA Live 16* acting as an example of what things look like when this key element is sub-par.

At least the gameplay demonstrates some sort of aspiration, though, which is not something that can be said for the available modes. Be A Pro and Dynasty modes come with the same problems as last year; the former suffering from a player rating system that forces you into a rigid and repetitive style of play, while the latter once again features a criminal lack of depth.

These amateur mistakes are always going to be criticised, but in the face of *NBA 2K* this poor execution stands out even more. At times, it's difficult not to feel genuine pity for this whole project. Then again, maybe things will work out next year...

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: EA Sports
DEVELOPER: EA Tiburon
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 2-10
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



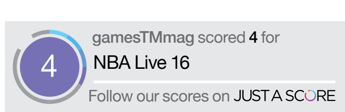
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

COMPLETE MISMATCH: Offence is, compared to defence, overpowered to the point of slapstick comedy. It's simply not possible to create a quality sports game with this level of imbalance.

VERDICT

NOWHERE NEAR THE LEVEL OF 2K'S NBA PRODUCTIONS



Below: Not only does the terrible defensive gameplay force you to concentrate on achieving huge offensive numbers, it also rids some of the NBA's most talented players of being able to impact a game in a way we're used to seeing from them in reality.



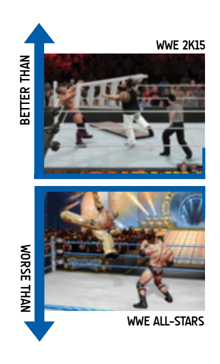


A JOBBER NO MORE

WWE 2K16

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, Xbox One, PS3
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 2K Sports
DEVELOPER: Yuke's / Visual Concepts
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (2-6 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



It's been a strange year for the WWE's top star, John Cena. Since he won the United States championship at Wrestlemania, he's restored prestige to the belt by putting on great matches week after week, working with fresh opponents and trying new moves to keep up with them. But even in a banner year, he's still drawing the same criticisms he was last year – his character hasn't evolved in over a decade, and his "overcoming the odds" gimmick doesn't work because he rarely ever loses. In many ways, *WWE 2K16* is like John Cena – it's the best the series has been in ages, but the old criticisms are as valid as ever.

What *WWE 2K16* excels at is offering every option a player could conceivably want. There's an enormous roster of over 100 characters and if your favourite isn't included (which is likely if you're a fan of the women's division in WWE NXT), you'll be pleased to know that creation options are back in full this year – we're once again able to create female wrestlers and custom arenas.

The 2K Showcase mode is back, this time highlighting the career of Stone Cold Steve Austin with a mixture of playable matches, in-game cinematics and archive footage. The decision to focus on a wrestler's whole career is preferable to last year's approach of focusing on specific rivalries, as it makes for greater variety. Greater improvements have been made to the MyCareer mode – in contrast to last year's dull procession of endless singles matches, this year's version gives players the chance to initiate feuds by interfering in matches, craft a persona in post-match interviews and develop allegiances with other wrestlers.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WOMEN'S WRESTLING: NXT's "four horsewomen" should definitely have been included here.
FUN, MAGGLE: It'd be nice (and a first) if Lawler, Cole and JBL sounded natural on commentary.

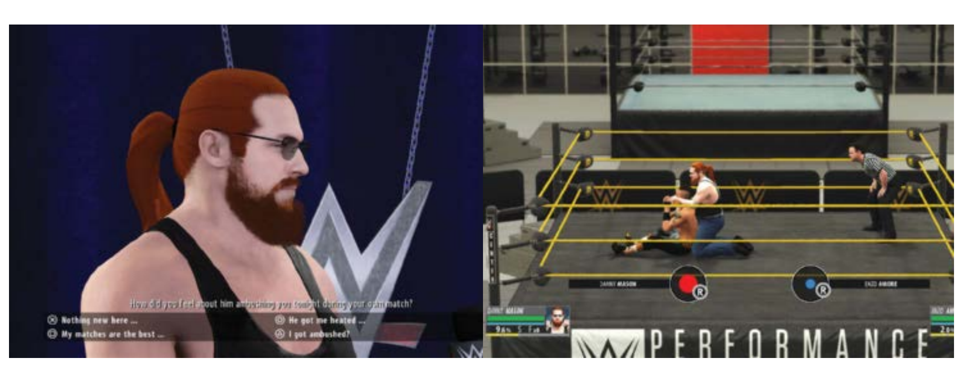
WWE 2K16 is more technically solid than last year and the in-ring action mostly holds together. Last year's chain wrestling is back, and accompanied by new "working holds" – essentially moves you use to simultaneously rest your wrestler and damage your opponent, using the same control system as chain wrestling. These introduce a nice additional element of strategy to matches. The new submission system, a game of cat and mouse played with the right analogue stick, is less successful – it's just too hard to consistently damage your opponent. Worse yet, the old problems are still present – you'll still see attacks failing to connect when it looks like they should, and the AI will still occasionally just stand around aimlessly. Likewise, the visuals are still a generation out of date and the commentary is still poor.

Ultimately, the problem with *WWE 2K16* is that it offers a whole lot for players to do, but the engine you have to do it in just isn't great. You'll have fun, but the flaws are too great to ignore.



Above: Iconic moments like Stone Cold's refusal to submit to Bret Hart at Wrestlemania 13 are covered in 2K Showcase. This year's commentary features former WWE play-by-play man Jim Ross, increasing the authenticity.

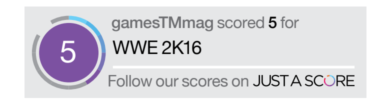




Above: MyCareer is far more enjoyable, as you're given far greater control. In a nice touch, you can allow wrestlers created by your friends to join your own on the WWE roster.

VERDICT

A SOLID MID-CARDER



Below: The *Tales*' series fast-paced combat has long been one of its strengths. In *Zestiria*, Sorey can combine with pals to unleash more powerful moves, but every skill has checks and balances to give a constant flow of battle.



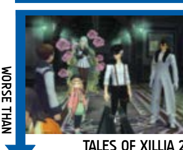


DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Bandai Namco Studios
PRICE: £49.99 (£39.99 PS3/PC)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII





WORSE THAN
TALES OF XILLIA 2

A ZESTY JRPG EPIC

Tales Of Zestiria

Can an unapologetic JRPG cut it on PS4? It's an approach that has served the *Tales* series well during the PS3 years, while its peers seem content to chase the western RPG aesthetic and experience. Bandai Namco's series has carved a niche among Japanese games by sticking staunchly to tradition.

Zestiria's structure may be familiar to series veterans, but it packs in enough new ideas and tweaks to its reliable formula to appeal to new and old players alike. The biggest improvement? It's closer to having an open world now, removing the sense of running through corridors that hampered earlier entries, and allowing a greater sense of discovery as you explore.

Set in a world loosely influenced by Norse mythology, players guide hero Sorey – a spiritually aware human raised by Seraphim, an elementally-aligned race invisible to most normal folk – through a tale that incorporates themes of war, environmentalism, and theology. *Zestiria* is surprisingly and wickedly political, regularly using its own mythology to condemn climate change and governmental pursuit of conflict as a form of economic policy. It's far deeper than its cheery anime veneer would imply.

It also enjoys deeper combat. *Tales*' familiar 'Linear Motion Battle System' – a best-of-both-worlds effort blending the frenzy of real-time action with the precision of turn-based – now includes the option for human party members to fuse with Seraphim, resulting in more potent weapons that unleash powerful moves. With a three-pronged system of melee, magic, and 'Seraphic Artes', it also lends a rock-paper-scissors balance to each battle, each style able to interrupt another, forcing players to react on the fly.

JRPG fans will delight at the depth of character customisation on offer. Beyond mere appearance; skills and stats can be improved through ability-gifting items, with intricate combinations that boost innate powers or unlock new ones. A choice of original Japanese or English dubbed audio is also a nice option, one clearly targeted at the core audience.

For all its improvements though, *Zestiria* is also a victim of its own long development schedule. Work began on the game in 2011, as a PS3-only title, and the limits of its origins are clear in its DNA. The attempt at an open world pales in scope to even the likes of seven-year-old *Fallout 3*, while its dungeons fall back on bad habits – short, linear, with simple or frustrating puzzles. There's an abundance of back-tracking, and once you unlock fast travel it's all too often blocked for narrative reasons without adequate payoff.

Struggling to shake off those last few shackles of the last gen, along with a cast that's not quite as appealing as those in the preceding *Xillia* duology, are ultimately the only things holding *Zestiria* back.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

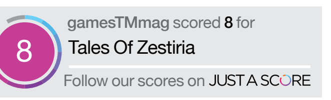
CHATTY: Character-developing skits are a staple of the *Tales* series, and return for *Zestiria*. They're surprisingly effective at building player affinity with the cast, as well as adding nuance to the story.

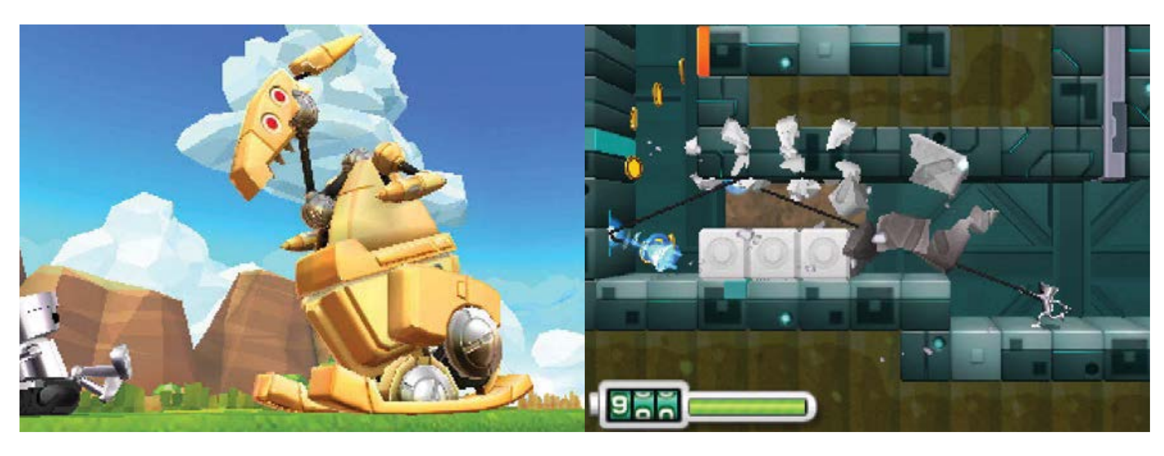




VERDICT

MINOR FLAWS, BUT STILL A CONTENDER FOR JRPG ROYALTY





Left: *Chibi-Robo* starts off with two types of attack. The X button is used for quick attacks fired straight ahead or at 45 degrees, while holding the Y button charges a stronger, longer attack that can be shot at any angle you like.

MAY CAUSE DROID RAGE

Chibi-Robo! Zip Lash

This year, *Chibi-Robo* turns ten, but this fifth outing for the robotic handyman will only provide further frustration for fans praying he'll one day become more than a bit player in Nintendo's roster. While past *Chibi-Robo* games have been 3D free-roaming affairs, *Zip Lash* is Skip's first attempt at putting the character in a 2D side-scrolling platformer. The result is a game that shows ambition but doesn't quite nail the execution.

The main gameplay mechanic is *Chibi-Robo*'s power cord, which hangs from his back. He can aim the cord and throw it to defeat enemies, break blocks and create a makeshift grappling hook.

Initially, he starts with a relatively short cord, meaning he can only hit targets a short distance away. Each stage has a number of collectibles that gradually increase the length of the cord, letting him reach enemies and objects further away.

In theory this sort of gimmick, when used correctly, could lead to some brilliantly head-scratching puzzle platforming. However, the game's stages are so straightforward in their design that on the rare occasion you find yourself faced with a target you can't yet reach, the alternative route is obvious.

The game also has an odd level progression system in which, after finishing a level, you stop a spinner to see how many stages you advance. If you beat stage 1-1 and roll a three, you'll head straight to stage 1-4. You still have to complete all six stages in a world to clear it and advance though, so this feels like a strange addition that only frustrates the player. Then, bizarrely, finishing a world lets you freely choose any stage you want, rendering the whole process pointless.

Perhaps most concerning, however, is the game's amiibo compatibility. To date, Nintendo's use of amiibo has been commendably restrained: it mostly only unlocks characters or skins which are fun, but not essential for finishing the game. *Zip Lash*, on the other hand, requires a *Chibi-Robo* amiibo to access a capsule machine feature that unlocks roughly 15 per cent of the gameplay. Given how many 3DS owners don't have a new model with NFC capability, it feels a bit too soon for that sort of thing.

Frustratingly, once you have sifted through all the nonsense, *Zip Lash* is actually a charming little platformer. It's just a shame it will roll your eyes as often as it warms your heart.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: JAPAN
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: SKIP
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



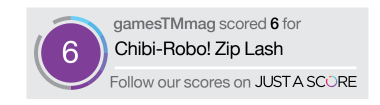
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PRODUCT PLACEMENT: Most stages have hidden collectibles, which are sweets from around the world. Oddly, these are actual brands, giving you an unsettling feeling that you're playing a big advert.

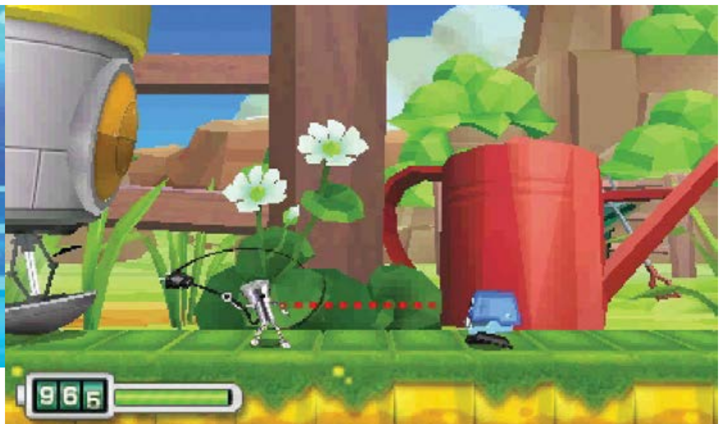
VERDICT

A FUN GAME MARRED BY BIZARRE DESIGN CHOICES





Above: The game's platforming stages are broken up with occasional vehicle-based levels, such as this three-lane wakesurfing affair. Each has its own unique gameplay mechanic.





This episode is very self-aware with regards to how episodic games make you solve puzzles – it's inward-looking and wry and we love it.

"NOTHING LIKE A LIGHTHOUSE TO TELL YOU YOU'VE REACHED THE END"

Life Is Strange Episode 5: Polarized



With a game like this, the journey is far more important than the destination, which is why *Life Is Strange* succeeds as a whole series despite what is – correct to its name – a polarising final chapter. The game suffers from what a *lot* of choice-based games suffer from, and that's a binary ending, and the feeling that no matter what you did over the past four chapters, you're left with one of two endings… neither of which have too much scope for improvement.

But the ending isn't bad. It's binary, sure, and it doesn't do justice to the whole chronology of what has come before, but it works. We're given satisfying arcs for the main characters and the side stories of a lot of the supporting cast are rounded off, some better than others. There's a lot of off-screen action detailed through a hollow villain's soliloquy, but this episode has a *lot* to get through with it's *Donnie Darko*-inspired time travel focus, so we can forgive that. The most interesting part of this episode, though, is the game's display of meta-narrative and self-awareness, all presented through the lens of Max herself. We've always thought this to be a game about Chloe – or at least a mystery about the whereabouts of main plot-point of episodes one to four, Rachel Amber – but here, in *Episode 5*, the agent of chaos herself takes centre stage.

We get to see a *lot* more of Arcadia Bay through Max's eyes this time, because there's a cerebral journey into her subconscious; a fantastic study of her character via her own insecurities and fears. At times, the themes of sexualisation within *Life Is Strange* and the way the narrative tugged towards intimacy felt uncomfortable, crow-barred, but through Max's fevered mind we see that the presentation we saw of it as players was a way of framing Max's perspective to *us.*

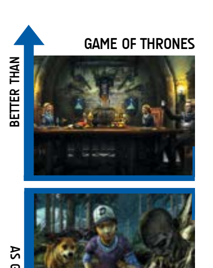
There's a lot of photography terminology in this episode, and a lot of people telling Max to "go fuck her selfie". Despite some of the game's now-trademark hammy writing, there's a point the writers are making: that Max is the centre of this world, everything that's happened has happened because of her. An introspective journey through her own mind is an amazing study of the teenage psyche, and the personal issues that are highlighted change depending on how you've been playing the game. That, to us, is the payoff. Not the binary ending, not the lacklustre resolutions some of the cast come to.

You play it to see how you've changed everyone's lives *as* Max, this meandering chaotic element, this self-obsessed teenager. But you don't hold it against her, because it's her journey, it's her *right* to be self-obsessed as the game studies what it is to be a victim of circumstance. This episode might not be the strongest ending we could have asked for, but overall this series is *essential.*

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Dontnod Entertainment
PRICE: Out now
RELEASE: £13.99 (Season Pass)
GENRE: Adventure
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN – GAME OF THRONES



AS GOOD AS – THE WALKING DEAD, SEASON 1

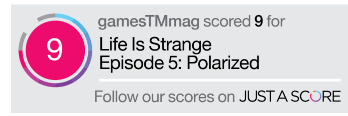
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT: The choices you've made in the game *do* come to the fore in this episode, but in a much more introspective way than you might be used to.

VERDICT

THE BEST EPISODIC GAME OUT THERE RIGHT NOW



WE BUILT THIS CITY

Anno 2205

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Blue Byte
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, Intel Core i5 CPU @ 2.6GHz or AMD Phenom II X4 @ 3.2GHz, 4GB RAM, GPU w/1GB VRAM, 35GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



When was the last time you paid nearly £50 for a game on Steam? And when was the last time you paid full price for a game on Steam that wasn't a triple-A title? It seems like Ubisoft has slightly overestimated the weight that the *Anno* brand wields in the strategy arena, as even legacy players will find *Anno 2205* a little disappointing. You'll be paying an awful lot of money for a game that just isn't that exciting.

The main problems with *Anno 2205* lie in its longevity. Unlike previous titles, which featured randomly-generated sandboxes, 2205 features pre-determined areas to build in. This means that, once you've achieved your end goal of colonising the moon, you'll struggle to find a huge amount of reasons to continue playing. Of course, you could use this opportunity to up the difficulty, but even then you'll be looking at essentially completing the same campaign all over again. It just feels like there isn't enough variety here to warrant the price tag.

This repetition doesn't just exist as an overarching problem, though, as it can be found in specific elements of the game, most noticeably in the impromptu combat missions and fetch quests that crop up throughout the world. There are certain special resources that are easily gathered by completing combat missions, but these are all extremely similar and feel like a chore after you've completed three or four of them. Enemy AI is a bit wobbly, and there is a distinct feeling that the missions are pretty half-baked. In previous titles you'd be attacked by other factions in your home areas, resulting in supply lines being disrupted. In *2205*, you can pretty much ignore the RTS portions of the game.

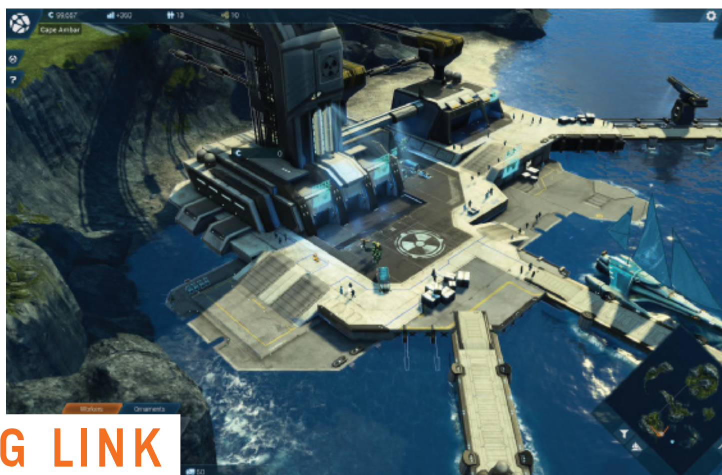
Despite this, the extended periods of building your spaceports can be a pleasure. There's something inherently enjoyable about creating a thriving homestead out of dust and watching it function efficiently and profitably, and due to *Anno*'s focus on economics you see puzzle elements begin to surface after a few hours, wherein you need to extend production of a particular resource but in order to do so you need to sacrifice other supply lines and so forth. Once you've upgraded your spaceports you can open transfer-based supply lines between your different outposts, giving you one more layer of development to consider.

It's a fairly robust system, but one of the biggest problems that we encountered is that we never really felt stressed while playing. This complaint isn't tied to any sort of masochism on our part, more that strategy games should be built on a foundation of sometimes dizzying micromanagement and the need to act quickly to avoid disaster. We were able to sit back and twiddle our thumbs more than we'd like – it all just feels a little dumbed down.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

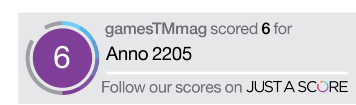
REAL-TIME SIMPLICITY: The RTS combat portions of *Anno 2205* are severely lacking in both variety and challenge. Playing the same scenarios over and over again just feels non-essential.


Above: We never managed to build anything this accomplished. As a pure city builder, *Anno* isn't a fantastic example; it's in economics and resource management where it shines




Above: An RTS is only as good as its UI. Everything in *Anno* is clean and easy to navigate.

VERDICT
IT'S FAIRLY ENJOYABLE, BUT WAIT FOR A SALE



GRIND THE NIGHT AWAY

Disgaea 5: Alliance Of Vengeance

For anyone not familiar with the *Disgaea* series, just looking at screenshots of *Disgaea 5* is enough to feel overwhelmed. The game's complex systems make the idea of playing this strategy RPG without any previous series experience seem like a ridiculous idea. On paper, perhaps it is, but in practice, it's not that mad at all.

In the sixth installment in the series, events take place once again in the fictional universe, the Netherworld. The storyline, much like in the fourth game, plays host to a politically heavy theme, this time focussing on the world's leader, Void Dark and his minions, The Lost. The latter are used as Void's private army to take over different Netherworlds across the universe, overthrowing their leaders, the Overlords, in the process. Centred on new character Killia, the story is a tale of revenge, your job being to guide Killia and your rebel army, including some very disgruntled Overlords, to Void Dark in a bid to get even.

With everyone wanting to defeat Void Dark for their own reasons, the thin string of revenge that holds the main characters together often looks like it could snap during the plot, giving the story an intriguing edge. Humorous at times and serious at others, the story also boasts some interesting characters and well staggered plot points, thus giving you a driving force to continue playing. As a stand-alone narrative, new players should be able to follow the proceedings, despite the bizarreness of *Disgaea 5*'s plot and the sometimes astounding dialogue.

A great addition to the series is Revenge Mode, which takes place during the already fantastic, chess-like battle system. Activated when a team member is hit or if a teammate has fallen, characters who have witnessed these acts against their comrades will slowly build up their Revenge Gauge, before unleashing Revenge Mode when full. If an Overlord activates Revenge Mode, they can unleash their special move, such as Red Magnus's Super Olympia, which turns him into a giant on the battlefield, with super strong attacks. Adding to the already tactical gameplay, this reward for being hit adds an interesting dimension to battle; it's a great way to get out of sticky situations, or alternatively, land yourself in them.

To succeed at *Disgaea 5*, you'll need to complete a long to-do list of tedious grinds, organising squads and interrogating prisoners, with planning being of the utmost importance. It may sound like hard work, but it's well worth the effort. A game for the old, the new, and those with patience.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: NIS America
DEVELOPER: Nippon Ichi Software
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

RESONANCE OF FATE



WORSE THAN



DRAGON QUEST VIII: JOURNEY OF THE CURSED KING





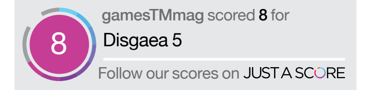
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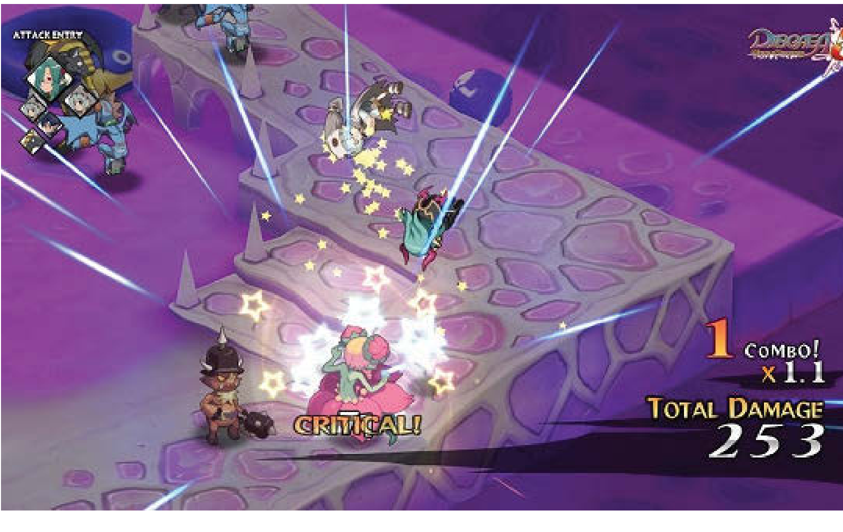
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

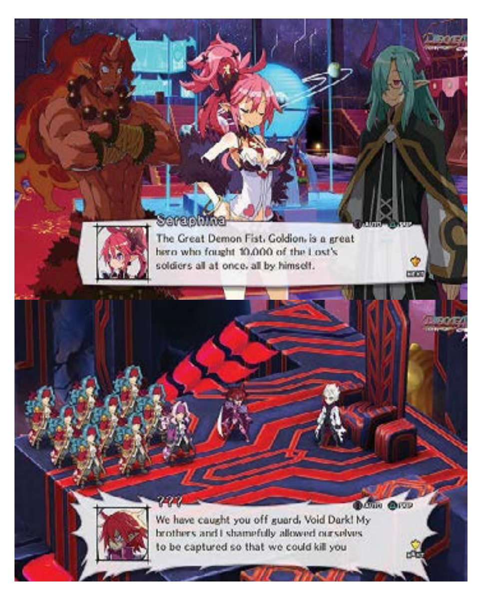
CURRY BOOST: With your own curry stand in your pocket Netherworld, you can now cook up some delicious battle boosts for yourself.

VERDICT

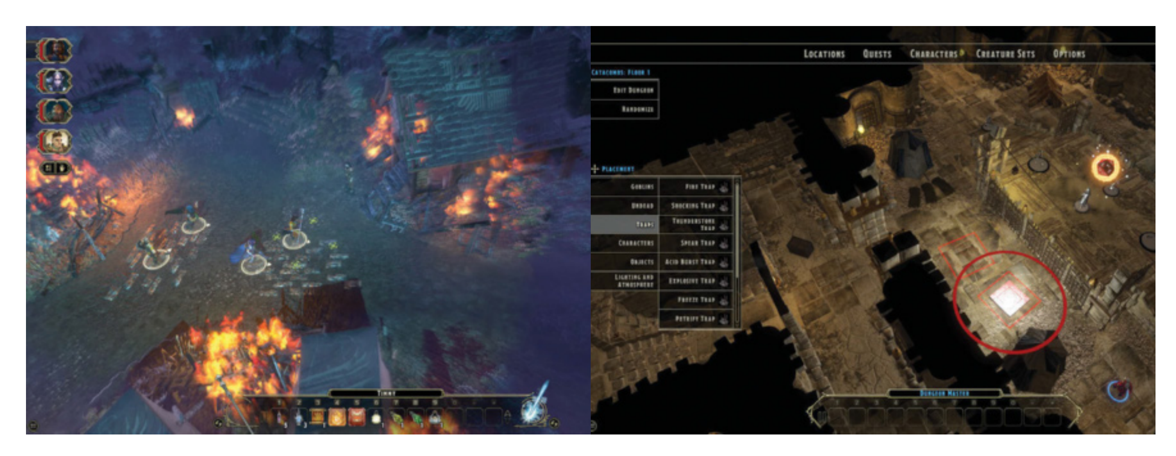
ONE OF THE MOST REWARDING EXPERIENCES ON THE PS4







Above: Attack multiple enemies in one execution with your team members, and you'll get combo points. Top up your bonus meter by gaining points in battle and you'll be rewarded with some loot once the stage is clear.



Left: You can mix and match objects from every tileset, meaning you can – at least – craft a visually unique experience for your adventure; perhaps a romp through catacombs dominated by nature, for example, or a bandit base hidden in the sewers.

MANUAL MONSTERS

Sword Coast Legends

The prestige surrounding *Sword Coast Legends* really does hold it back. Its isometric viewpoint in a Forgotten Realms setting recalls genuine classics *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale*, while its pride as a D&D game creates an expectation of depth. As an RPG completely removed from such inspirations it is, if nothing else, an enjoyable experience with a robust set of mechanics. It might not compete alongside recent, stellar examples of the genre – such as *Divinity: Original Sin* or *Wasteland 2* – but it at least provides enough to get you involved.

The campaign is perhaps the biggest disappointment. Its combat is a loose interpretation of D&D rules, becoming a tech-tree of unlockable abilities that let you hone your characters' classes in a personally-driven but still restricted manner. It is designed for speed and fluidity, not for complexity; its closest companion would be the *Dragon Age* series, not a hardback book from Wizards Of The Coast. This keeps combat quick and reactive, and though it uses a real-time with pause system it's never too reliant on it – you could happily play through entirely real-time. But this pace also carries through to the story, with a tale not of the quality we expect from the game's heritage. The writing is the problem here: quick, matter-of-fact exposition and a lot of clichéd, forgettable characters in both the main story and the numerous side-quests. It's all a little perfunctory.

The reason for this is the game's reliance on the DM mode, whereby another player can take control of the dungeons, guiding the path of the player, masking traps and hiding treasure rooms, even controlling the scores of enemies you'll slaughter. This is where the speedier combat makes better sense, and though both sides can pause to take a moment and think, it's designed to not be a necessity. Sadly, the ability to create your own adventures isn't quite as fulfilling, and is severely limited in a number of ways. Dungeons are randomised, and though a DM can keep re-rolling to find a layout they're happy with, there isn't enough hand-crafted control being given to the creator. Only two monster sets can be chosen for a dungeon, too, and even then the selection of enemies isn't as vast as it needs to be. It's possible to tie a complete adventure together, but the number of tilesets available can be counted on both hands – repetition is inevitable. As a result, the core aspect to the game feels a little flat; the largest part of DMing isn't picking which monsters appear when, but building a complete adventure that your players will remember and look forward to continuing – *Sword Coast Legends* simply doesn't manage to do that.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Digital Extremes
DEVELOPER: Digital Extremes/n-Space
PRICE: £31.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-5
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit OS, 2.66GHz Dual Core CPU, 4GB RAM, 512MB GPU, 20GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: DAGGERDALE

WORSE THAN: DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

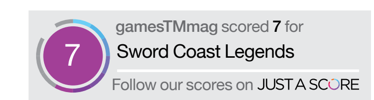
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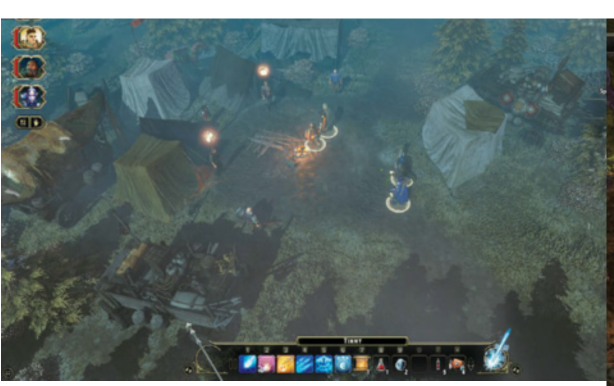
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

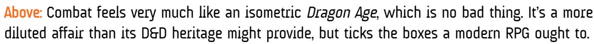
THE MASTER: Though not quite as deep as D&D rules, combat itself is sufficient. If the DM adventure creation mode offered more options and greater creative control, the game could've been a hit.

VERDICT

WILL BE REMEMBERED FOR ITS POTENTIAL, IF AT ALL



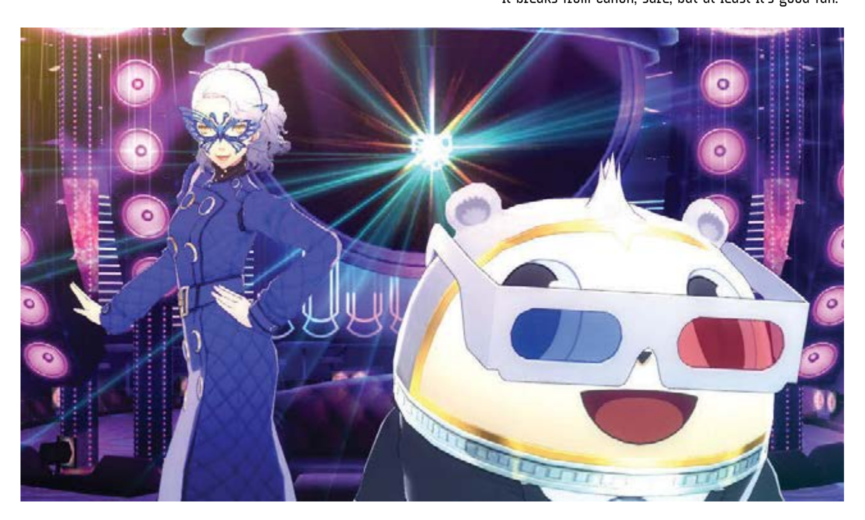


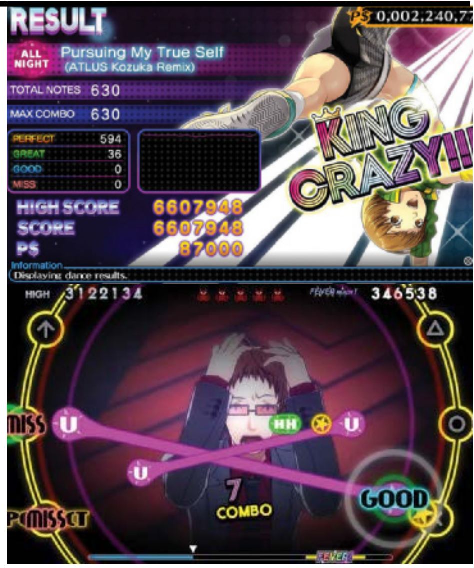


Above: Combat feels very much like an isometric *Dragon Age*, which is no bad thing. It's a more diluted affair than its D&D heritage might provide, but ticks the boxes a modern RPG ought to.



Below: The variety of customisations and items that you can lay on various characters is fascinating: it breaks from canon, sure, but at least it's good fun.





DETAILS

FORMAT: Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Atlus and NISAmerica
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SENRAN KAGURA: BON APPETIT



WORSE THAN

FINAL FANTASY THEATRHYTHM: CURTAIN CALL

WALTZ WITH ME, SENPAI

Persona 4: Dancing All Night

There's a simplicity to *Persona 4: Dancing All Night* that treads the line between choreographic genius and rhythm game fury. The presentation of the game is impeccable – you'd be forgiven for thinking this was a 'full' console release, rather than for a handheld console: the character models (remade specifically for the game) look gorgeous, the animations are fluid and whatever motion capturing magic Atlus has used to make the dances look real is, frankly, hypnotic.

So the problems, then, come into how the game is charted. You play as the main cast of *Persona 4* (and one new character) that quite literally have to dance for their lives. Pulled back into the 'Shadow World' made famous by the vanilla *Persona 4*, the eclectic and ostensibly lovable cast are tasked with dancing away their demons and saving the souls of a group of idols by – basically – being chipper and losing their inhibitions.

All this focus on dancing means the charting is really odd – sometimes you'll be dancing to the 'groove' of the song, the notes you need to hit corresponding to vocals, then to melody, then to bass. Sometimes (especially in the jazzier songs) you'll be dancing to the off-beat, which is fine because that's how dancing works, but the irregularity of it all can get a bit confusing. Thankfully, there's a whole catalogue of items you can use to modify the difficulty to your own preference – from making the notes invisible to slowing them down dramatically.

The game's insistence that you dance your problems away also leads to problems elsewhere – namely, in the story mode. For the love of all that is *Persona*, don't go into this game expecting the same level of storytelling you get in the main series. The story here is abhorrent: long-winded, patronising and an insult to the base the original game was built upon. The voice actors have done incredibly well with the script they've been given, and even the actors replacing old parts (Chie being the most obvious) do a very good job of capturing the spirit of the original game. Don't buy this if you want some kind of closure on the whole *Persona 4* saga, though – it'll only upset you.

This is one of the nicest Vita games to come out in the last few years, though – there's longevity there for anyone that enjoys the music of the *Persona* franchise, as well as a good amount of fan service crammed into a pretty small game. The 'Free Play' mode and score chasing is the real game here, and being able to play *exactly* how you want with item modifications makes up for the lacklustre story offering. It's probably the last game we'll get in the *Persona 4* franchise, now, and it's a shame really that the story is such a half-hearted cash-in on the characters so many of us have come to know.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

RHYTHMIC ACTION: This game relies less on you playing to a beat and more on you learning and getting to know chart patterns.

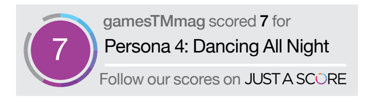






VERDICT

ENJOYABLE MOSTLY FOR ITS PERSONA HERITAGE



A CHANGE OF PACE, BUT NOT A GREAT ONE

Tales From The Borderlands Episode 4: Escape Plan Bravo

One scene, the only one in our playthrough of this entire episode, made us break into a chuckle: it involved ex-Hyperion employee Rhys in a finger-gun shootout with douchebag Hyperion accountants – and we've not spoiled a thing by telling you that much. It's a very funny minute or two of return-to-form Telltale, with a pitch-perfect interpretation of the *Borderlands* canon in an otherwise, largely uninspired bridge to the episodic finale.

This middle episode needed its own identity to hold up as a distinct individual experience, so we're going into space this time, on a tin can rocket ship to Handsome Jack's old stomping ground, Hyperion's headquarters. This should be a hotbed of confrontation and intense dialogue where the heroes attempt to talk their way past old foes, and the Hyperion space station does lend itself to a number of interesting scenarios. But even if the script was honed to perfection (it isn't), episode four suffers from the same problem as previous episodes in the series. With *Tales From The Borderlands*, Telltale has taken a step too far towards being an interactive animation rather than a game. Facile quick-time events punctuate long periods of zero interaction and very occasionally we'll be given control of a character in a brief and linear scene, as if for no other reason that to remind us that we are actually playing a game. The dialogue options were the only time we felt the player had any real consequence in this fiction, and that was just to check our choices against thousands of other players at then end of the episode.

Is the finger-gun shootout worth it? Yes, though this one scene doesn't rescue the rest of the episode. You've played the season this far, however, so you're probably committed now.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Multi
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: $5/£3.23
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP SP3, 2Ghz Core 2 Duo, 3GB RAM, 512MB video card, 3GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS

WALLACE AND GROMIT'S GRAND ADVENTURES



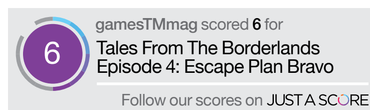
WORSE THAN



TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS EP. 1

VERDICT

TOO MUCH SHOW AND TELL, NOT ENOUGH DO



Below: This is fun as dumb as it gets. It's a shame the rest of the episode couldn't strike the same chord on the funny bone as the finger gun shootout.



ROBOTS? MONSTERS? ONE WAY TO FIND OUT WHO'S BETTER...

Tales From The Borderlands Episode 5: The Vault Of The Traveler

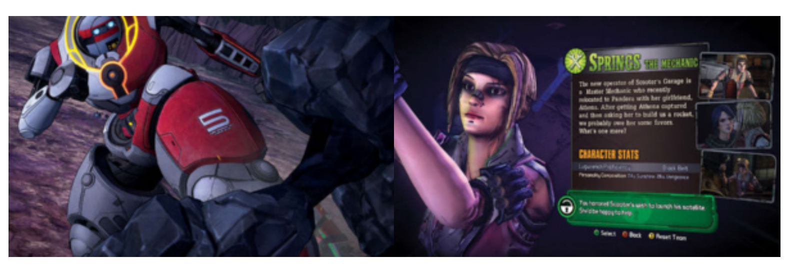
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Android, iOS, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: $5/£3.23
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP SP3, 2Ghz Core 2 Duo, 3GB RAM, 512MB video card, 3GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

So, final episode and we're going to see what's in – and what's protecting – the Vault. While we don't have quite the same anticipation for its treasures and dangers as we did at the end of *Borderlands*, this should be the crescendo we've been waiting for. Just a few loose ends to tie up first: like another series of dumb quick-time events followed by a load of filler dialogue that's supposed to pass as witty and amusing, topped by a bit of insipid story arc conclusion, where some of the characters we have lukewarm feelings for make offbeat romantic comments to each other.

Never mind, at least there's a big robot-monster fight! In the wake of *Titanfall* and the return of huge constructs bashing lumps out of each other, this can't fail. And… it's okay. Your choices up until that point will dictate which moves your character will perform and though it does end up like a watered-down *Dragon Ball Z* battle, it's the longest most intense period of interaction we've had for a while. And then, a bit more nauseatingly romantic ribbon-tying of the plot before we finally get to the vault. We won't say what's in it but, sadly, things play out a little too predictably for our liking.

It's the end of this episode and of season one – and we feel disappointed. We've been anticipating a battle with a huge monster and a fabulous treasure for the whole season, which should lend itself so effortlessly to epic drama, so it doesn't bode well for a potential Season Two. We had hoped that *Tales From The Borderlands* would hit the high notes of the excellent *The Walking Dead* but, despite the largely imaginative use of the *Borderlands* canon, the dialogue flatlines too often and we haven't cared about the consequences of our decisions enough for it to be considered a classic in Telltale's portfolio.



BETTER THAN

WALLACE AND GROMIT

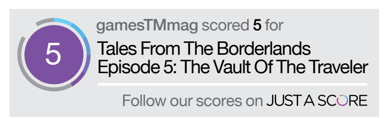


WORSE THAN

TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND

VERDICT

AN UNFORTUNATE DISAPPOINTMENT



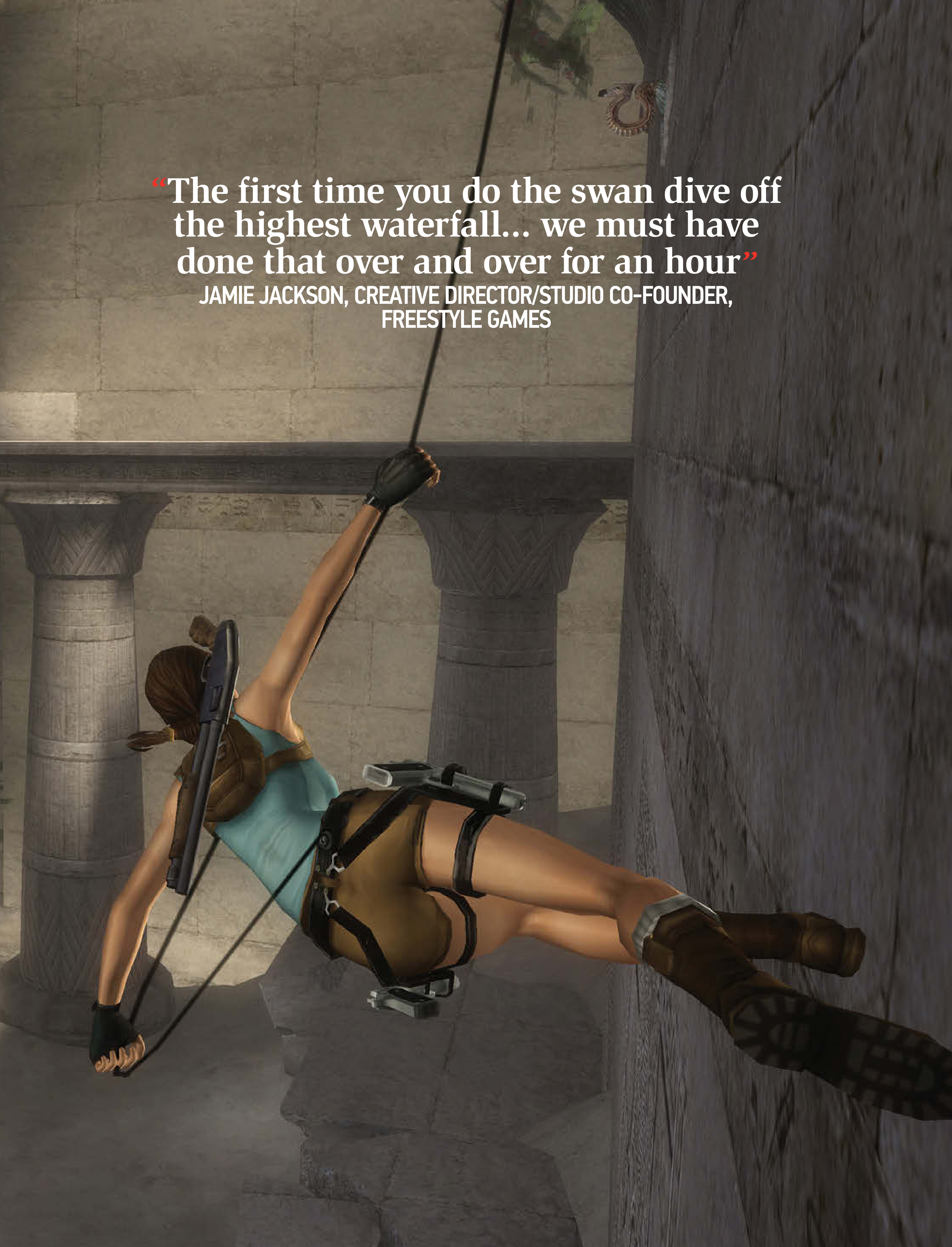


WHY I ♥...

TOMB RAIDER

JAMIE JACKSON, CREATIVE DIRECTOR/ STUDIO CO-FOUNDER, FREESTYLE GAMES

"I went to university and I studied car design, and I was there for four years. I can attribute my near-failure of every year to a videogame... the original Tomb Raider *just fucking blew my mind. I'm a big nerd, right? I grew up with all this sci-fi, all these board games, all this action adventure, and when we first got* Tomb Raider, *me and my buddy just sat there playing this game and we were fucking blown away. The first time you do the swan dive off the highest waterfall... we must have done that over and over for an hour – just doing it, climbing back up, and doing it again. It was moments like that that actually made me want to make games – in my final year, a mate of mine who was working at Codemasters knew I was making 3D models in my spare time and got me on-board with* Colin McRae Rally. *And it was all because of my early influences!"*



> “The first time you do the swan dive off the highest waterfall… we must have done that over and over for an hour”
>
> **JAMIE JACKSON, CREATIVE DIRECTOR/STUDIO CO-FOUNDER, FREESTYLE GAMES**

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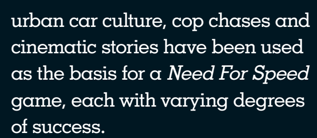
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THE RETRO GUIDE TO… NEED FOR SPEED

As EA reboots its two-decade old racing franchise, games™ recalls the titles that made the series what it is today

When it comes to racing games there is a long list of well-known and reputable names that come to mind. On the simulation side of the genre the likes of *Gran Turismo* and *Forza* rule the roost, but when it comes to more arcade-based racing there is a much greater variety of titles. *Need For Speed* has been around since 1994, and in that time 22 different core *NFS* games have been released – it goes without saying that at this point it's fairly synonymous with the racing genre.

Need For Speed has been a fairly eclectic franchise, too, and while it hasn't always maintained its crown as the number one arcade racing game – a fairly prominent battle with the *Burnout* series occurred during the PS2 era – the name has been put to a wide range of racing styles. Everything from track racing to urban car culture, cop chases and cinematic stories have been used as the basis for a *Need For Speed* game, each with varying degrees of success.



It's long been an important money-maker for EA, too, and while the publisher concluded that it would be a smart move to give the series a rare hiatus – missing a release in 2014 for what was typically an annual franchise for Electronic Arts – to prepare for this year's reboot, there's no doubt in anyone's mind that the name *Need For Speed* still carries significant weight in the gaming community. Buckle up and get ready to revisit some of the blazing fast titles that made the series famous.





THE NEED FOR SPEED 1994

SYSTEM: 3DO, DOS, SATURN, PS1

As legend has it, *The Need For Speed* was born of an executive meeting where EA's head honchos, peering out onto the highway below their Vancouver office, realised drivers were too often stuck behind traffic, and that while most people drove so very few of them ever really felt a sensation of speed. The idea, then, was to enable player's fantasies of racing on the open road, and with its impressive 3D graphics – a revelation at the time – the game did just that. The visuals were particularly important, giving it a then-unparalleled realism that created that critical feeling of speed and even came with snazzy full-motion videos showcasing the machines you'd be driving or the result of a failed cop chase.





NEED FOR SPEED II 1997

SYSTEM: PC, PS1

With the critical and financial success of the original it was clear that *Need For Speed* was something special. The sequel, released three years after its predecessor, began to hone in on the series' core facets. It added the ability to customise and tune your vehicles but removed many elements too. Point-to-point tracks were no longer present, in place were more fantastical circuit races, but crucially the sequel also removed the police force – an element that many enjoyed from the original. In this way *Need For Speed II* was the first example of the franchise's take on track racing rather than the speed racer attitude that would become integral to the series' success.

NEED FOR SPEED III: HOT PURSUIT 1998

SYSTEM: PC, PS1

EA saw fit to reintroduce police chases into the third game, a facet that would become a central pillar of the *NFS* experience. The concept was built upon from its basic implementation in the original with a police force willing and able to take extreme measures to ensure a racer was stopped, such as the inclusion of multiple cop cars or their individual abilities to block racers. In the PC version it was also possible to play as the police, reversing the roles for the first time.





NEED FOR SPEED: ROAD CHALLENGE 1999

SYSTEM: PC, PS1

Entitled *High Stakes* in America, the focus of this *Need For Speed* was on a mode that let you place wagers on duels – with the winner taking the loser's waged car. Police chases – and even the option to play as the cops – also returned, solidifying their status as core elements of the series while the addition of damage modelling on cars helped to beef up the impact of those car chases. Damage affected the handling of your cars, too – a step forward for the franchise's realism.







NEED FOR SPEED: PORSCHE 2000
2000

SYSTEM: GBA, PC, PS1

You'll probably gather by the name, but a deal with Porsche meant that this *Need For Speed* featured the car manufacturer heavily, even going as far as having you play as a Porsche test driver – a crude way of introducing short *Gran Turismo*-style challenges. The PC and PS1 versions of the game were considerably different, with the former having a more realistic handling model while the latter favoured arcade handling. The PC version was better received as a result, with many claiming it was the best the series had seen to date. The GBA version suffered the fate of many such ports at the time, with the limits of the hardware also stifling the imagination of developers looking to bring the game over to handheld.





NEED FOR SPEED: HOT PURSUIT 2 2002

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

This was the first time since the second game in the series that *Need For Speed* had taken a year-long break, returning with a follow-up to the popular *NFS III*. As you can probably imagine the game leveraged the concept of police evasion as an integral part of the experience, while once again including the option to play as drivers on the right side of the law as well.

Hot Pursuit 2 also used a very arcade-y handling style, beginning the franchise's long-standing indecisiveness when it came to the sort of racing experience it wanted to offer. Nonetheless the game certainly looked the part as it stepped up to the PS2 to with gusto; though the equivalent versions on GameCube, Xbox and even PC were all criticised for their inferiority. This likely came as a result of them being built separately from the PS2 version, with criticism arising from the reduced AI quality and lowered sense of speed on these platforms.

NEED FOR SPEED: UNDERGROUND
2003

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Here was a game that was very much of its time, riding the wave of the movie *The Fast And The Furious*. The street racer setting added a fresh spin on the franchise, bringing with it the option to customise not only a vehicle's performance but to change its visual look too – from spoilers to the colour of the neon underneath. This game weirdly removed the police chases – which would've made sense given the setting – but it didn't really matter: the game was a huge success.





"POLICE EVASION WAS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE SERIES"



NEED FOR SPEED: UNDERGROUND 2
2004

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

With only a year between the release of the original *Underground* and its sequel, EA was banking on the success of the title. All the same many fondly recall *Underground 2* as one of the best *Need For Speed* games, returning to the street racer setting but in a new city with many more customisation options as well as the addition of an open world Free Run mode. Here players could challenge other AI street racers to impromptu races, a facet that has since become a key feature for the franchise in its online multiplayer modes.

Its approach to the import scene was frequently commended but its horrendously stereotypical characters and awful use of 'street' language still put a number of people off. Most controversial was the heavy use of product placement for non-racing companies, an idea that remains equally off-putting for gamers to this day.





NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED 2005

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

It had been EA Black Box who created the original *Underground* as one of its first games, and the developer followed that up with an even greater success in *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*, a title that would become the franchise's highest-selling game at more than 16 million copies. *Most Wanted* set the template for what many would consider to be the 'typical' *Need For Speed* game, meaning police chases, fast cars and an open world to explore. EA Black Box took the open world aspect of *Underground 2* (which it had not developed) and added in police chases. It gave the game a more energetic feeling than its previous iterations since you could easily become embroiled in a high-speed pursuit at a moment's notice.

This aspect was considerably enhanced over previous versions, too, with a 'heat' level representing the aggression that the police might demonstrate as well as leaving a variety of new tools at their disposal – from roadblocks and spike strips to helicopters tracking your position. This, combined with the inclusion of multiplayer across most platforms, made it quite novel at the time. It helped that *Most Wanted* was a launch title for the Xbox 360 of course, giving gamers a glimpse of what the new generation was setting out to be.





NEED FOR SPEED: CARBON 2006

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Carbon was the epitome of 'more of the same'. Once again it returned to night-only racing in order to recreate the tone seen in *Underground*, but it also lifted many of *Most Wanted*'s mechanics and features. It offered little new outside of visual improvements – it was particularly notorious for its strong use of blurring at high speeds – but nonetheless remained a solid outing for the series. It also included an 'Autosculpt' feature, that let players better mould a vehicle to their liking, as well as custom vinyls that could be resized, skewed and moved – an element that had been preceded by the original *Forza Motorsport* a year earlier. Interestingly the online for *Carbon* included exclusive modes – *Pursuit Knockout* and *Pursuit Tag* – where some players played as cops chasing after racers. The former had racers joining the police after being arrested, while the latter, as the name suggests, would swap roles once a cop car shunted a racer.





NEED FOR SPEED: PROSTREET 2007

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

ProStreet was a big departure for the series, eschewing the arcade handling for something a little more serious and realistic. Instead of illegal street racing, this *NFS* game only featured closed tracks within a series of car meets. Most important was the heavy emphasis on realism, though, which was an unusual diversion for the series. Not only was the pace much slower than previous *Need For Speed* games, but realistic damage and even elements like the aerodynamics of your modifications all impacted the performance of your car during a race.

The move to a more realistic handling model didn't do the brand any good. The handling itself was awkward, failing to match the equivalent competition and making cornering an unnecessarily arduous task. This was a shame because the visual and mechanical customisation options were once again enhanced, but despite the fact that nitrous was included the sensation of drifting around a corner as your rear end swung out was a practical impossibility. As a result it was negatively received by critics and fans alike – the style that *Need For Speed* had spent years cultivating seemingly cast aside in a misguided attempt to broaden the franchise's appeal.

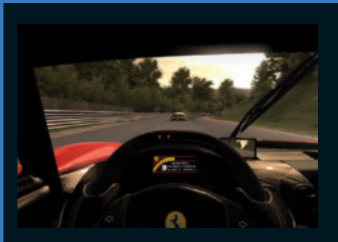
NEED FOR SPEED: UNDERCOVER 2008

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Panicked by the negative reaction to *ProStreet*, EA's next *NFS* title would return to its comfort zone, and was given an extended development period to help win back fans. Sadly, it failed. Despite bringing back an open world and police chases, *Undercover* was criticised for being far too easy, having an awful frame rate and empty streets. Its live-action cut-scenes were also slammed as too cheesy, a complaint that can also be targeted at the series' latest reboot.

MORE TO LOOK OUT FOR

- NEED FOR SPEED: V-RALLY (1997) N64, PC, PS1, GBC
- NEED FOR SPEED: V-RALLY 2 (1999) DREAMCAST, PC, PS1
- NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND: RIVALS (2005) PSP
- NEED FOR SPEED CARBON: OWN THE CITY (2006) DS, GBA, PSP
- NEED FOR SPEED: UNDERCOVER (2008) DS, MOBILE, PSP
- NEED FOR SPEED: SHIFT (2009) PSP, MOBILE
- NEED FOR SPEED: NITRO-X (2009) DSI
- NEED FOR SPEED: WORLD (2010) PC
- NEED FOR SPEED: THE RUN (2011) WII, 3DS
- NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED U (2012) WII U





NEED FOR SPEED: SHIFT 2009

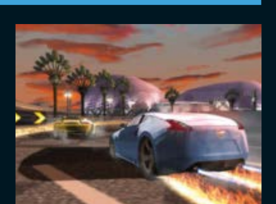
SYSTEM: VARIOUS

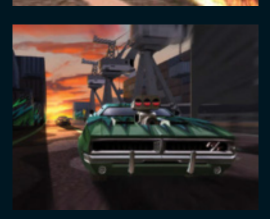
Determined to give the brand a greater breadth, EA returned *Need For Speed* once more to the world of simulation driving with *Shift*. Developed by Slightly Mad Studios – a capable team when it comes to racing games – this title refined the handling so it was more in line with the expectations of a simulation racer, and for the first time since *Porsche 2000* included an in-car view. Unlike *ProStreet*, however, *Shift* was very well received – at least critically – proving that the name could be used for a more serious style of racing game. In competing with Microsoft's *Forza* series and the then-anticipated *Gran Turismo 5*, however, *Shift*'s new approach just couldn't cut it sales-wise.

NEED FOR SPEED: NITRO 2009

SYSTEM: DS, WII

Released a month after *Shift*, *Nitro* exaggerated the series' arcade racing for a more casual audience, releasing only for Nintendo platforms. Though it featured many real-life cars, they were heavily modified with colourful customisation playing a big part of the game's aesthetic. The inclusion of an 'Own It' mode meant that when the player was in first place their choice of colour and tags decorated the track and surrounding buildings.





NEED FOR SPEED: HOT PURSUIT 2010

SYSTEM: PC, PS3, XBOX 360

Hot Pursuit was notable for a number of reasons, key among them being its developer Criterion Games, who had been fighting behind the scenes for the right to work on a *Need For Speed* title. The developer used its experience from the *Burnout* series to create a superlative open world racing game, finding a balance between open world shenanigans, police chases and arcade handling.

Though it played like classic *Burnout*, it was the multiplayer that was truly revolutionary thanks to Autolog. This feature tracked all your friends' times for every event and reported back to you, practically egging you on for one more attempt at shaving seconds off your fastest time. It was a revelation for the genre at the time, and became a permanent series feature.





SHIFT 2: UNLEASHED 2011

SYSTEM: PC, PS3, XBOX 360

In a bid to further distinguish the serious' sim racer *Shift* brand away from the more traditional arcade-y style, EA used the name *Need For Speed* minimally when referring to the sequel. One of the major features it touted was 'Helmet Cam', a novel way of directing players' attention to important elements – such as the apex of a bend – as well as blurring when reaching higher speeds to simulate a racer's "tunnel vision" while driving down straights. *Shift 2* didn't do much to innovate, however, and simply iterated on what had come before, with EA hoping to force its way into the simulation side of the genre.





NEED FOR SPEED: THE RUN 2011

SYSTEM: PC, PS3, XBOX 360

This misguided racer took the franchise into an unusual space, utilising the familiar brand of arcade driving to present a more cinematic experience. At its best this meant that there were more showy set pieces within certain stages rather than tried-and-tested point-to-point or circuit races. But at its worst the game also included on-foot sections controlled through QTEs, a decidedly poor decision that spoilt what the brand had long been about. Outside of a handful of unique events, however, the game failed to utilise its admittedly contrived story in any valuable fashion – making an illegal street race across America somehow end up feeling dull.

NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED 2012

SYSTEM: PC, PS3, XBOX 360

While not officially a reboot of the *Most Wanted* title that appeared early in the very same generation, EA decided to release this new *NFS* under the same name as its predecessor. The difference here was that Criterion was left in charge once again, and once again it had crafted an open world *Need For Speed* title that fans expected. It iterated rather than innovated, but was very well-received all the same.







NEED FOR SPEED RIVALS 2013

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Ghost Games' debut title relied heavily on Criterion's template, with the distinction here being the dual storylines and play styles. Players could follow careers as both illegal street racers and law enforcement officers. Though this had been possible before, the feature was now considerably enhanced with police drivers able to call upon a variety of useful gadgets, from roadblocks to EMPs.

Rivals also introduced the ability to seamlessly switch from single to multiplayer. That in itself wasn't especially exciting, but the two opposing, playable factions meant that emergent police chases became a lot more compelling since they were often controlled by other gamers – perhaps even friends.

NEED FOR SPEED 2015

SYSTEM: PC, PS4, XBOX ONE

With Ghost Games' reboot, EA decided to take a year off from releasing a *Need For Speed* title for the first time since *Hot Pursuit 2* all the way back in 2002. Reviewed in this very issue, this resetting of the series is certainly attractive but ultimately fails to capitalise on the various different elements that made the *Need For Speed* series such an important franchise in the racing genre.



CRAIG SULLIVAN INTERVIEW

Creative director on Need For Speed talks rebooting a heritage



Have you played the original *Need For Speed*?

It's one of those things where it sounds a bit made up, but it's really true that when I was doing a BTEC in design and reprographics my friend Tony Newbury had just bought a 3DO. He had *The Need For Speed* on it and he brought it to college and he was showing it to everybody and I remember driving in a Testarossa and driving over the hills and the hot air balloons coming in and I was just like 'this is like photoreal, graphics are not going to get better than this'. And it was coming up to Christmas and he was going away, so he asked if I would like to borrow it and I said 'of course!'. So I spent the next two weeks just playing *Road And Track Presents The Need For Speed*. And it was that game where I thought 'one day I want to make something like this'.

What was it about that game that stood out to you so much?

It was the first time where I'd been able to look at a car – and I remember you could see the prancing horse badge of the Ferrari on the back of the car. I remember playing that and thinking 'this is amazing', it was super immersive. I remember it had full-motion videos for some of the car inspections, or a showreel trailer and when you got busted it had the cop animated as well. It was full-on, textured 3D driving and considering how simple it was I just played it for days and weeks.

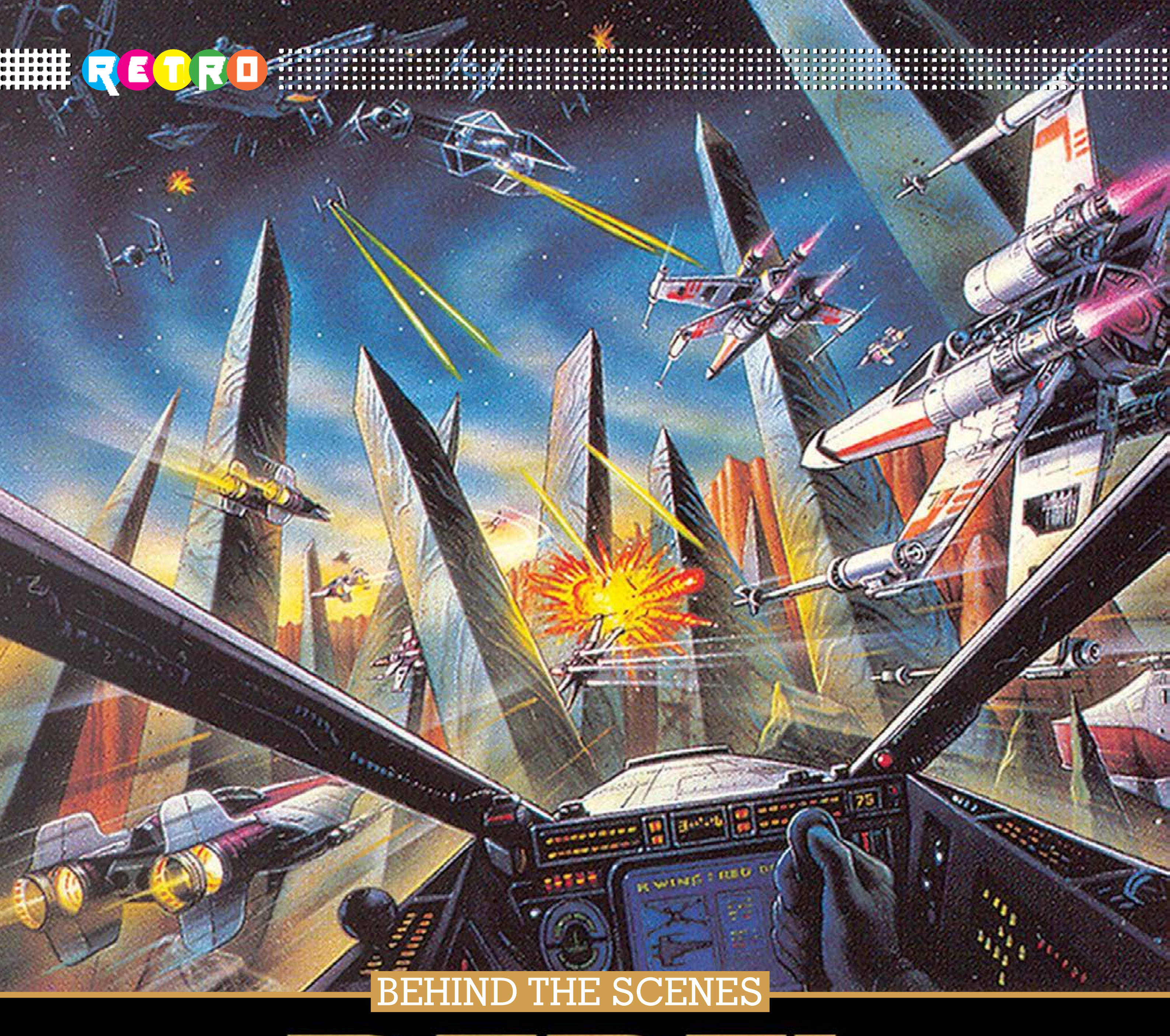
***Underground* has been a fan favourite for years; what do you make of that popularity?**

I think it does what any good videogame should do, which is capture a moment and it allows you to do things that you can't do in real-life. So *The Fast And The Furious* movies were out around that time and they painted this amazing picture of modified, imported cars being raced on the streets. A lot of people didn't really understand what that scene was, and you could argue that the films kind of fictionalised a lot of that. *Underground* and *Underground 2* were out around then and if you liked the movie it was the first time where a movie was being kind of captured by a gameplay experience that you could be in control of.

How did you decide what was important for a *NFS* reboot?

There's a few different things you have to take into account. I – and a lot of people on the team – have played *Need For Speed* for over 20 years so there are things that we individually like about them, but we looked at the different experiences that *Need For Speed* has given and we thought it should be open world, it should have cops in it and we wanted customisation. But as a developer you need to realise that you can't just make games for yourself. We're lucky enough where we're in an age where we can speak to our fans really easily, and them to us. So we get these recurring themes and they've been the same for the last five-seven years – narrative, an urban environment, something akin to the *Underground* 'feel'. It was really easy for us to finish the last game and know what we were going to do next – because we were like 'well, we have to do something like this'.





BEHIND THE SCENES

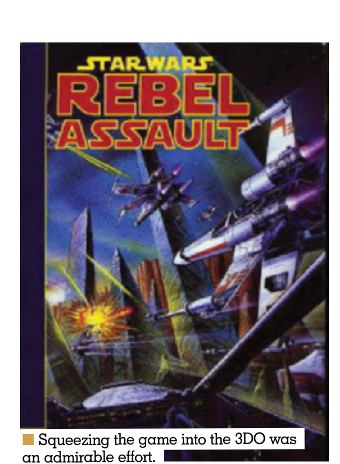
REBEL ASSAULT

A long time ago in a place not so far away, there was no Battlefront, no X-Wing vs TIE Fighter, not even Dark Forces or Jedi Knight. **games™** peeks into the forces behind this oft-maligned, yet influential early entry into the Star Wars universe



The beginning of the first level and an awkward flight through Tatooine's narrow canyons in a T-16.

Released: 1993
Format: PC, Mac, Sega-CD/ Mega-CD, 3DO
Publisher: LucasArts
Key Staff: Vince Lee (designer, programmer and project lead), Ron K. Lussier (lead artist), Daniel Colon, Richard Green (artists), Aaron Muszalski (lead art technician), John Williams (music)



Squeezing the game into the 3DO was an admirable effort.

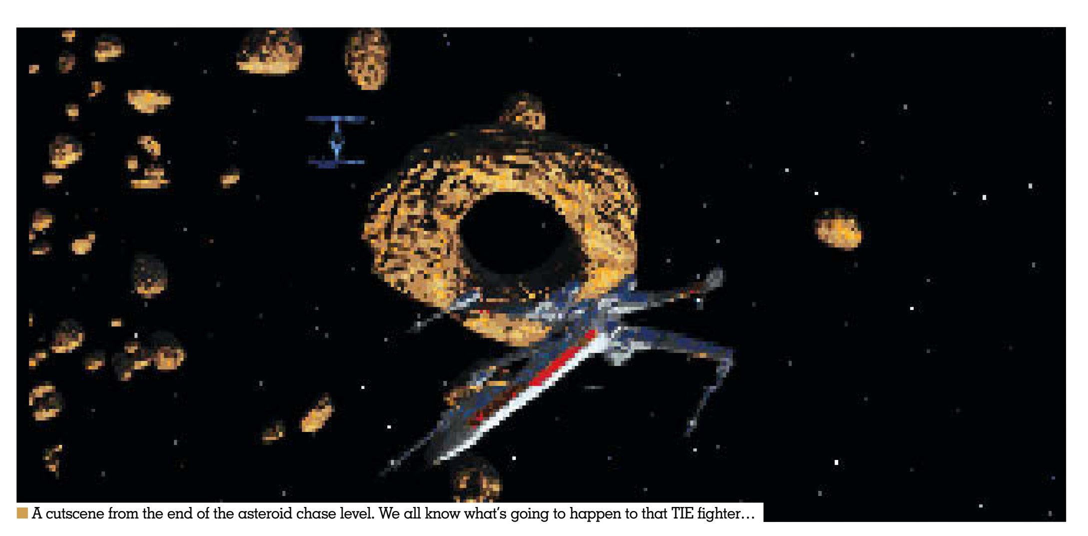
FORMED IN 1982, Lucasfilm Games made its name in the mid-Eighties with 8-bit games such as *The Eidolon* and *Ballblazer*, before later in the decade beginning its successful line of adventures games, mainly based around the popular SCUMM engine. Unable to develop games based around its most famous IP, it wasn't until 1993 that the company (by now renamed LucasArts) finally released its first *Star Wars* title. Space sim *X-Wing* was a predictably huge hit, finally giving gamers and *Star Wars* fans the chance to jump into the cockpit of the famous starfighter and take on the mantle of a brave rebel pilot. Developed at a similar time was another game, one that was intended to reflect its more cinematic origins and take advantage of the emerging CD-ROM technology.

Rather than directly emulate the movies, the idea behind *Rebel Assault* was to generate a fresh story featuring new characters, yet take advantage of the film's memorable sequences and action scenes. The player took on the role of Rookie One, choosing either a female or male character, and battled through many levels similar to the original trilogy, yet also subtly different in many ways. Like Luke Skywalker, Rookie One grew up on Tatooine; unlike Luke they are already in the academy and flying out of the rebel base at Anchorhead. Level one sees Rookie One navigating the tight canyons of their home planet in the triangular and fragile T-16 Skyhopper; other levels include overhead shooting, first-person shooting and one third-person on-foot level.

Despite its scope, the development team of *Rebel Assault* was surprisingly small. The lead coder on the project was Vince Lee, who had been hired by LucasArts principally to work as a Commodore Amiga programmer. "My interest in computer games is what got me into programming," recalls Lee, "I remember learning BASIC to code a crude *Tron*-style light cycle game on a TRS-80 at school. Then I wrote a number of small arcade games in 8080 assembly language and sold my first game to a user's group for $350." While in college, Lee used his leftover scholarship money to purchase a Commodore Amiga. "I then learned C writing an *Asteroids* clone called *Stellaryx*. It was published, didn't sell many copies, but was a good experience." Unexcited by the range of jobs on offer having completed his degree in mechanical engineering, Lee applied to LucasArts to work on games instead.

Given the style of *Rebel Assault*, its 3D artists would be key, and the trio of Ron Lussier, Richard Green and Dan Colon formed the rest of the main team along with Justin Graham (installer/launcher coder) and Tamlynn Barra (voice director and producer). They worked on all four versions of the game (PC, Mac, 3DO and Sega/Mega-CD), although as mentioned above, Lee's speciality was actually on the Commodore Amiga. "On the Amiga I really enjoyed the Cinemaware games," he says "and their games effectively combined game sequences with movie-like cutscenes. I was also a fan of the *Star Wars* vector graphic games and fairly early on it was clear that *Rebel Assault* was going to end up as a game that combined elements from the two." As the Commodore computer never officially came with a CD-ROM

REBEL ASSAULT WAS NEVER EXPECTED TO MAKE ANY MONEY



A cutscene from the end of the asteroid chase level. We all know what's going to happen to that TIE fighter…



Attacking AT-Ats on Hoth in a snowspeeder.

drive, the game was never considered for the Amiga, despite Lee's expertise. Yet while he was a fan of the classic games, Lee wasn't exactly a diehard follower of the films themselves.

"Anybody who knew me at the time probably remembers me as a big science and engineering nerd," he laughs, "And as such I was very interested in science fiction, but hadn't yet learned to appreciate the more 'casual' relationship with technology that *Star Wars* and similar movies have." Regarding them as 'science fantasy', it wasn't until Lee began working at LucasArts that he built an appreciation for the franchise's iconic characters and rich human themes such as temptation and redemption that serve to underpin the futuristic action. From a management view, *Rebel Assault* had two requirements – that it was based on *Star Wars* and that it used the CD-ROM format. "It had some convoluted origins as a demo for CD-ROM-based hardware," says Lee, "but that was it." Perhaps more surprising was that a relatively inexperienced, if talented, programmer such as Vince Lee was allowed to take control of the project. "*Rebel Assault* was never expected to make any money, which I suppose is why I was in charge of it. At the time LucasArts was still mainly known for its adventure games."

LucasArts management may have only handed down two edicts to *Rebel Assault*'s development team, yet even as the project lingered in its early stages, these caused major headaches. The CD-ROM technology of the time was struggling to adapt to the imagination of coders, as Lee explains. "In those days most PCs had almost no memory and fairly feeble processing power. So if you wanted complex moving imagery, it had to be pre-generated and streamed off the CD in real time. This style of game became known as 'rails' and only really works well when travelling in some kind of vehicle, as that justifies why the player doesn't have any real freedom of movement." The issue this then presented was the fact that much of the *Star Wars* movies takes place outside of vehicles. An exact recreation of the trilogy was going to be extremely tricky.

"Most of the *Star Wars* movies involve long sequences of characters talking, arguing, flirting, lightsaber fighting and I-am-your-fathering," smiles Lee. "It became pretty clear early on that trying to shoehorn one or more of the *Star Wars* movies as-is into *Rebel Assault* would have made a really annoying game." The only possible solution would have been the action segments punctured by multiple cutscenes; but even back in 1992, Lee realised how potentially damaging this could be. "I'm always the first one to skip past long dramatic cutscenes in games. They interrupt the experience and usually come across as more melodramatic than dramatic. If we'd stuck to the movies, the cutscenes would have been longer than the game. And besides, we didn't have the budget for it." The

MANAGING NEW TECH

LucasArts' former manager of new technology, Toshiyasu 'Toshi' Morita answers our questions on Rebel Assault

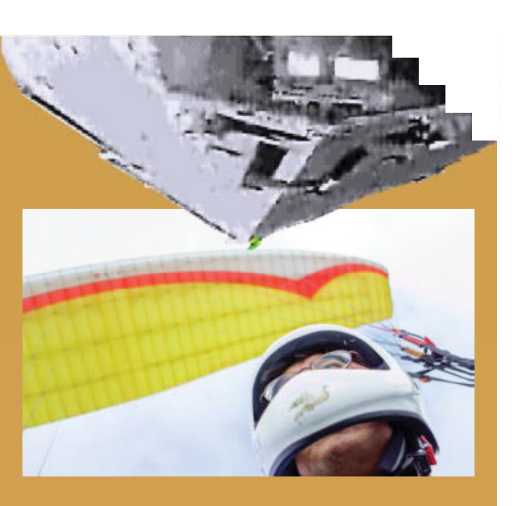
What did you think of *Rebel Assault*'s concept?
I thought it was fresh and interesting. Most of the 3D games were rendered at runtime but *Rebel Assault* was rendered at development time, so it was possible to have more detail, although this suffered a bit when reduced down to 1x CD-ROM speed.

Was it always intended to use newer technology?
Yes. Vince was a big Amiga fanatic and used 3D rendering software on it. One day he brought in a 3D-rendered video stream of a trench run, and this became the game concept. I think there was some early discussion of shipping on floppy discs, but it wasn't very serious.

Was there a worry that would limit its market?
There were some concerns. However, after the game shipped, LucasArts was approached by a bunch of CD-ROM manufacturers who wanted to bundle *Rebel Assault* with their drives because it actually required a CD-ROM to play. I heard there were several million units of the game sold because of this bundling.

Were any alternative styles discussed?
I think there was some early discussion about rendering the polygons in software, but most of us knew we could not fill half the screen with software-rendered polygons at a playable frame-rate, so the idea was quickly dropped. At the time, IBM PC video cards supported 2D acceleration but not 3D, so hardware polygon rendering was not an option.

The Mega-CD did struggle with the game…
The Sega-CD processor was fairly slow compared to even a low-end PC of that era



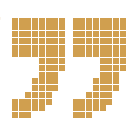
which would typically have a 80386 processor running at 33mhz, which could do about 4-8 MIPS [million instructions per second] in good conditions. The Sega-CD had two processors which combined could execute about 2 MIPS, so there's a difference of about 4:1 in processor performance. Plus other issues such as the memory buses and bitmap data conversion…

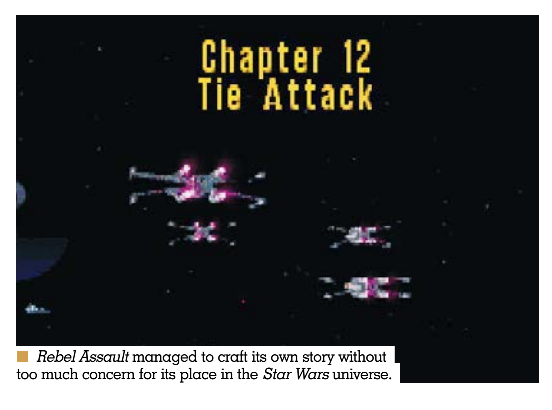




Rebel Assault launches an assault on your senses with mixed results. Superb graphics and sound immerse you… imprecise controls will drive you to the dark side

Gamepro, 1994





■ *Rebel Assault* managed to craft its own story without too much concern for its place in the *Star Wars* universe.

solution was to create new characters and plot from scratch while incorporating themes and vehicles from the famous saga, with the new storyline dovetailing to a certain degree to the plot of the movies. Beginning on Tatooine, Rookie One is a former farm boy/girl, and a rebel pilot in training.

After a brief T-16 Skyhopper practice flight through the desert planet's labyrinthine canyons, the rebel base at Anchorhead is attacked by the empire. Rookie One's training is put on hold as they must take to the space above Tatooine and attack the Star Destroyer threatening the planet. After an asteroid field chase and AT-AT attack, both modelled on *Star Wars*' sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back*, there's an on-foot section followed by a brace of incongruous A-Wing missions. Then ultimately, the hero takes part in the assault on the first Death Star – the fate of the rebellion is in your hands.

■■■ "I decided that making a fun game was more important than staying true to the *Star Wars* canon," says Lee, an eye-opening statement given how guarded George Lucas could be over his creation. "And departing from the characters and story let us do just that." The movies had a limited number of action sequences that lent themselves to the rails style shooter. "And we were able to borrow the most suitable of them for *Rebel Assault*: flying a T-16 Skyhopper, dog-fighting with TIEs in an X-Wing, dodging asteroids, taking down walkers, blowing up the Death Star, and so on." Fortunately, Lee already had experience working on this type of game, despite the rails gameplay not existing meaningfully at the time.

"I'd done some contract work in college adding features to a terrain generation program named Vista for the Amiga," remembers Lee. "One feature it had was the ability to generate a sequence of images that played back as a flyover animation, similar to the genesis effect from *Star Trek II*. So when the idea of creating a CD-ROM experience arose, I began experimenting with compressing the image sequences to see if I could get them small enough to stream comfortably off the first generation of CD-ROM drives." Lee was trailblazing; at the time, the only other notable CD games were *Myst* and *The 7th Guest*. Neither had attempted to weld arcade-style action to their complex images.

But it was a tortuous process. Digitising and playback of full frame video simply wasn't possible with the technology of the early Nineties. "The scenes were actually built from individual frame grabs," says Lee, "hand-cut into pieces, touched up, reassembled and animated manually. It was very labour intensive and required a lot of trickery." Ron Lussier led the 3D art team, and with no established procedure in place, his team was flying by the seat of its pants. "We

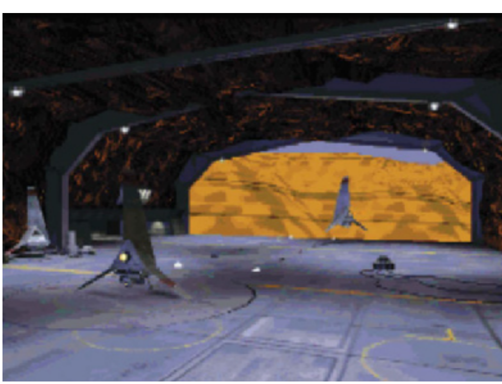
I DECIDED THAT MAKING A FUN GAME WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN STAYING TRUE TO THE STAR WARS CANON

had countless challenges," recalls Lee painfully. "For example, CD-ROM drives were very primitive at the time, and CD-ROM burners were rare and expensive. Not many programmers will relate today, but when *Rebel Assault* was written, multitasking wasn't available yet. Because of this, the whole game ran off a CPU interrupt to work around the limitations in the CD-ROM drives and drivers. And while creating the game, the company didn't even own a CD burner – we had to send copies of the game on hard drives to an external company every time we needed to burn a CD for testing."

Nevertheless, development of *Rebel Assault* proceeded relatively uneventfully, with no-one seemingly caring enough about the project to dictate terms to the team. "There



■ Having despatched an AT-AT, Rookie One crashes on Hoth and endures a painful on-foot level.

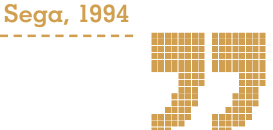


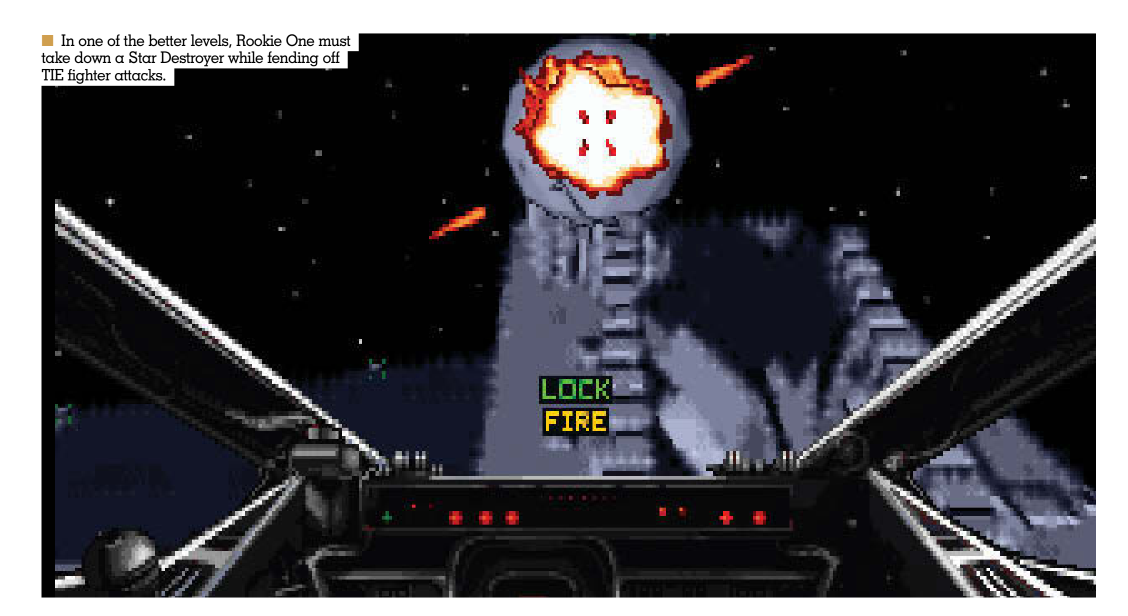
WHAT THEY SAID...



All the best in stirring music from John Williams [and] convincingly rendered images. Something for Mega-CD owners to get excited about. It's just a pity that the fun doesn't go on and on

Mean Machines Sega, 1994





In one of the better levels, Rookie One must take down a Star Destroyer while fending off TIE fighter attacks.

"There might have been a few artistic disagreements here and there," recalls Lee, "but nobody really cared enough about the project prior to release to worry about it too much." 3D models were used and animated in the 3D studio, while the only original footage filmed was a sequence in which a group of LucasArts employees were dressed as pilots for one of the game's few cutscenes. However, Lee's struggles against PC technology paled into insignificance against the 3DO and, in particular, the Sega-CD, or Mega-CD in Europe. Fans of the oft-maligned Mega Drive add-on may wish to look away now.

"Unfortunately the Sega-CD was a horrible console," grimaces Lee. "It was basically a 16-bit Sega Genesis console with a CD-ROM drive tacked on. Its display system was still tile-based, and designed for *Mario*-style games, not raster images. I don't believe it even had enough memory to display a full-screen image at more than 4-bit colour." The console couldn't even manage all the levels; a stage that saw Rookie One take on Imperial Probe droids on Hoth was excised from the Sega-CD version. "And remember," continues Lee, "that Windows 95 wouldn't come out for another two years, and Windows 3 was not a viable choice for games. We had no alternative to MS-DOS, although we did use a DOS extender to exceed the 640k memory limit."

An element that was part of every iteration of *Rebel Assault*, and something that hugely endeared the game to the press and public alike, was its music. From beginning to end, this was the first *Star Wars* game to feature the famous and soul-stirring original score by composer John Williams. "It was the first game from LucasArts to include a digitised soundtrack," notes Lee, "though by today's standards, at a horribly low 11k sampling rate." Like most developers, all of LucasArts previous games had been on the standard floppy disk format. Due to space restrictions, these used Midi-based sound systems which resulted in an electronically beepy sound on the sound cards of the time. Continues Lee, "I actually coded an early

> **IT WAS THE FIRST GAME FROM LUCASARTS TO INCLUDE A DIGITISED SOUNDTRACK**

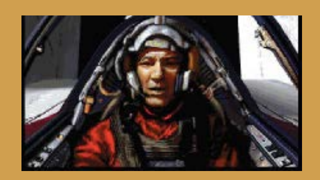
A CAST OF MANY

Many of the characters in Rebel Assault have a mini-biography in the game's manual. Here's a quick resume of their roles.



CAPTAIN MERRICK SIMMS

THE LEADER OF Blue Squadron, Simms was promoted to captain after an acclaimed victory at Dantooine. He's a skilled pilot who always keeps his cool. Simms leads the first trench run against the Death Star but fails.



COMMANDER JAKE FARRELL

A veteran of the old republic, Farrell even trained some of the pilots in the empire's fleet. Upon retirement, Farrell joined the rebel alliance and assumes the Han Solo role at the end of Rookie One's Death Star trench run.



COMMANDER RU MARLEEN

The youngest commander in the alliance, Marleen trains pilots for battle. Her skill at discerning the most talented fliers makes her a valued asset, and she takes on the Wedge Antilles role in the final Death Star battle.

> A GAMING EVOLUTION Myst > Star Wars: Rebel Assault > Star Wars Battlefront

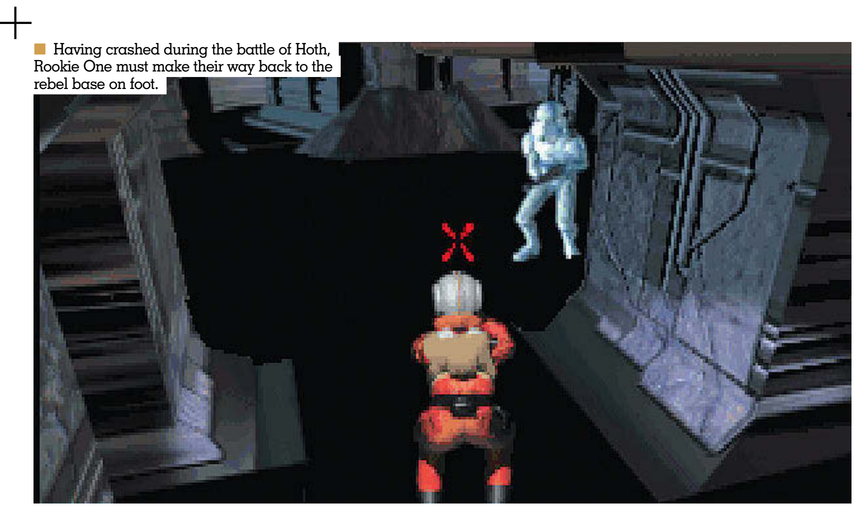


Myst upped the ante in terms of graphics, offering beautiful, if generally non-interactive images. A big style influence.



And now the circle is complete… fully-fledged and free-roaming action in a *Star Wars* universe was born.





■ Having crashed during the battle of Hoth, Rookie One must make their way back to the rebel base on foot.



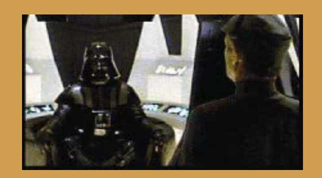
version of the opening to *Rebel Assault* with Midi sound and I hated it! Fortunately, I had a sound digitizer on my Amiga, and experiments with it led to the streaming sound system eventually used in the game." While far from perfect, *Rebel Assault*'s use of the iconic music helped gloss over some of the gameplay issues players experienced.

■■■ *Rebel Assault* was not expected to do well; the team delivered the game on time, despite the challenges of the Sega-CD version. "The original lifetime forecast [for sales] was 15 thousand units," recalls Lee, "and that was later raised to 25 thousand, and then again to 50 thousand shortly before release, mainly after the feedback from preview showings started coming in. And if my memory serves, the initial run of 100 thousand or so units sold out within the first three days, which no-one expected." Critical reception to Rebel Assault was not so clear-cut.

While the public had been starved of *Star Wars*-themed games and were wowed by the then-impressive graphics on display, journalists were more cautious of the new style of gameplay that the game employed, as well as some of the technical restrictions – clumsy controls, grainy and indistinct graphics and a lack of influence over movement. Lee accepts the game's criticisms with grace.

"Sure, everything could have been done better in retrospect," he smiles, "but given the numerous constraints the team operated under, there's nothing I think we could have done better at the time. I think we were fortunate as well that the game hit at just the right time, occupying a narrow window between 2D and true 3D games, before technology could make the latter possible. I don't think it's had any lasting effect on the industry as a whole, but it does amuse me sometimes to think of the copycat rails games that came out afterwards that tried to ride the same wave." For Lee personally, the experience of both *Rebel Assault* and its superior sequel (for which he had a similar role), were life changing. "They are still some of my fondest memories, not just of the games themselves, but also being at a company with so many wildly creative and interesting people. The success I found there gave me the confidence to start and run my Palm Software company, and in turn led to my current career in iOS and Android development."

Rebel Assault is undoubtedly flawed, especially from the perspective of 22 years later, but its key role in the development of not only *Star Wars* games but gaming's inexorable transition from the pixelated efforts of the Eighties and early Nineties to the full-blown cinematic experiences of today can never be overstated.



DARTH VADER

■ Darth Vader plots against the rebel alliance in several cutscenes and is the only character from the movies to make a significant appearance. Seriously, you don't actually need us to tell you who Vader is, do you?



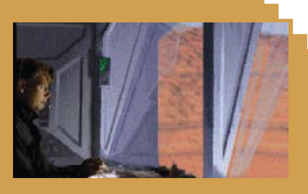
ROOKIE ONE

■ An inhabitant of Tatooine, Rookie One has joined the alliance and is a student of both the force and the rebel flight training school. The character is a like-for-like replacement for Luke Skywalker.



ROOKIE THURLOW HARRIS

■ A rebel captain's son, Harris has spent most of his life in his father's shadow. Harris takes on the Biggs Darklighter role in the attack on the Death Star, with a similar demise. That planet-destroying weapon is really quite dangerous.



TURLAND HACK

■ A close friend of Rookie One, Turland Hack was a communications officer at the rebel's Anchorhead base. He is killed fairly early on in the game when the base gets destroyed by those ruthless Imperial forces.









INTERVIEW

MIKE DISKETT

20 years after its release, Syndicate Wars finally has the spiritual successor it deserves. What better time, then, to have a chat with its creator, Mike Diskett?

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



***Theme Park* (Amiga version)** (1994)
Programmer



Startopia (2001)
Programmer



Grand Theft Auto IV (2008)
Programmer



You were just a programmer on the original *Syndicate* – how did you jump to lead on *Syndicate Wars*?
Syndicate was already being made when I arrived at Bullfrog, but I worked on the Amiga version, then moved on to *Theme Park* on Amiga. While I was working on something else some time later, I forget what, I suggested we do a new *Syndicate*. The bosses thought it was a great idea and just let me go off on it.

I don't remember what it was that I was actually doing that made me think 'I would much rather be making a new *Syndicate* game' – though I do remember working on tech demos – things like a natural motion simulator – but it really didn't work well on Amiga.

You still managed to squeeze a lot out of the Amiga though, it seems.
The strange thing is I was an Atari ST owner… though I don't think any ST owner could claim it was the better machine.

Why was there such a gap between the first and second *Syndicate* games?
It was very different to now – we were very insulated as to how people felt about the original game. Now everything's very open on the Internet, there's a thousand opinions on anything you can think of. But back then we never knew if there was anyone out there enjoying *Syndicate* – the only number you had was the sales figure, it was the only feedback we had.

But also, back then I had absolutely no fear – I look back and I'm surprised at how fearless I was. I was far more nervous doing *Satellite Reign* than I was *Syndicate Wars*… I think lack of experience made me arguably more confident.

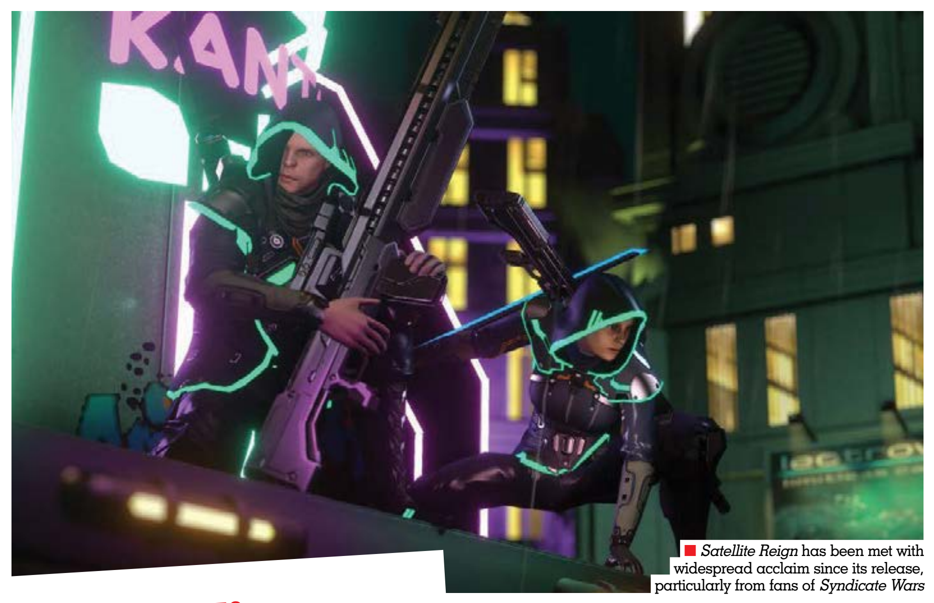
> THE WHOLE THING WAS JUST SO NONSENSICAL, BUT I WOULD JUST DESCRIBE IT AS ANOTHER PETER MOLYNEUX CRAZY EXAGGERATION

Were your original plans for *Syndicate Wars* the same as how the finished game ended up?
I wanted it to be in 3D, to have destructible environments and dynamic lighting, and then I wanted it to feature three factions – EuroCorp, the Zealots and the Punks. Almost everything we set out to do from day one, we got into the game. I don't think I realised how ambitious it



THE PAD PROBLEM

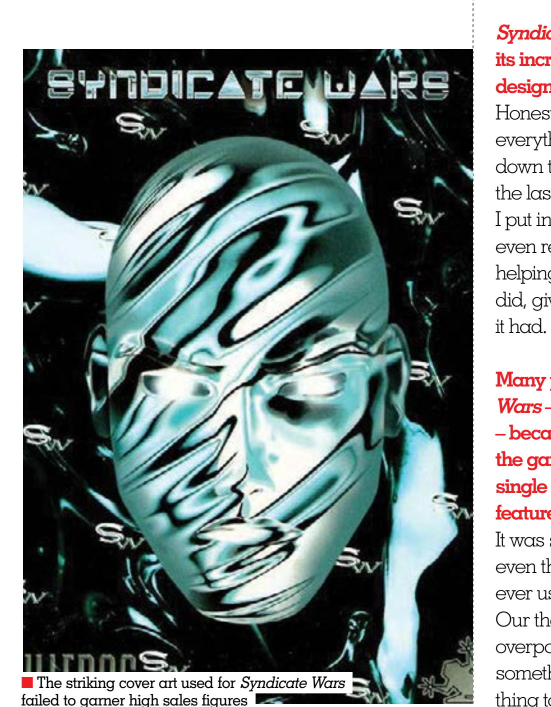
■■■ *Syndicate Wars* was one of the numerous 'very PC' games ported to console in the Nineties, with a PlayStation version hitting in 1997. Technically accomplished – in some ways actually quite superior to the PC version – the game nonetheless had one huge problem: its control scheme just didn't translate. "It had better lighting across the polygons, but it was crippled by having to play with the joypad," Diskett told us, "What surprised me was seeing some people ask on the Steam forums for joypad controls to be in *Satellite Reign*, 'like they were in *Syndicate Wars*'."



■ *Satellite Reign* has been met with widespread acclaim since its release, particularly from fans of *Syndicate Wars*

WHAT'S NEXT?

■■■ At the time we spoke to Diskett, *Satellite Reign* had just about broken even, meaning the 5 Lives team was about to be *making money*. So what would come next for the studio now that it had established itself in the world? For the time being it's going to be more work on *Satellite Reign*, adding in multiplayer elements and building out from there – but there's a chance for something else, too: "There has been talk of a *Startopia* reboot," Diskett admitted, "That has popped up. It's another game that sold really badly – it has a lot of fans, but at the time it pretty much killed Mucky Foot."



■ The striking cover art used for *Syndicate Wars* failed to garner high sales figures

was, but we were fortunate – PCs were doubling in speed on a regular basis back then, so we could cram more stuff in and… PC specs were increasing faster than we were developing the game!

Was there anything you wanted to put in the game but couldn't?

We had a water tower in a test level, and I always wanted that to be destroyable and have water flow out onto the city streets below. I think I always knew it wasn't possible – the tech still isn't there to do that, at the ultra-realistic level that I have in my head. It can be done in tech demos, but not real-time… maybe in another 20 years!

***Syndicate Wars* is remembered by many for its incredible atmosphere. Was that something designed from day one?**

Honestly, not really. I was basically just doing everything, so a lot of graphics in the game are down to things I programmed in there – like the laser effects, the rain, the shadow casting. I put in a version of ambient occlusion without even really understanding it, and that ended up helping the lighting look the way it did, giving the game the character it had.

Many people love *Syndicate Wars* – and the original *Syndicate* – because of how you could 'break' the game, say by persuading every single citizen in a level. Was this feature intentional?

It was such early days, I don't even think the word 'balance' was ever used about game design. Our thought process wasn't about overpowering the player, but if something was an awesomely fun thing to do, we'd let them do it.

Another much-loved element of *Syndicate Wars* is the weapons. What was the design process like on those?

The weapons really came about by experimenting with graphical effects. The laser was an experimentation with beam tech – I was just playing around with the laser and its wide effect, the massive triangle it forms, and that became the weapon in the game. It was the same with the electricity weapon, just playing around with things that looked good. We had some crazy weapons – the nuclear grenade was pretty much just a joke, we asked what would be the craziest weapon you could have, and someone suggested a nuclear bomb in a grenade.

And what about the destruction? That was a feature ahead of its time.

Destruction always reminds me – there was an odd thing about *Syndicate Wars*: everything was a weird scale. If you look at the people compared to the skyscrapers, the size of the windows, you'll see that all the ratios are completely off.

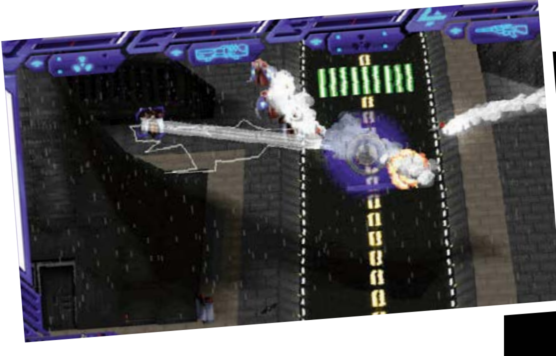
But yes, we always knew we wanted to do destruction, but it wasn't until about halfway through that we decided we had a handle on it. But I do think we went a bit too far with it, as it got to the point where you could just destroy everything – it's another one of these balancing issues we didn't consider. We never stopped to think if we should allow that.

The story was interesting, featuring elements like religion and satires on capitalism we don't tend to see in other games even now. How do you feel about it these days?

For me personally, I'm not really a big fan of story in games. If I want a deep, involved story I'll read a book – I like the story in games to be things that I've done in the world rather than just words plonked in the world that I have to read. So we made *Syndicate Wars* so its mission briefings highlighted what you had to do separately from all of the story blurb – which was great, as it covered all the bases.



■ The Bullfrog team giving us their best cyberpunk poses.



Intense firefights would break out almost without warning in *Syndicate Wars*. To this day, it's still exhilarating.

Destruction in *Syndicate Wars* was impressive in the extreme, with players often levelling entire cities – just because they could.

Syndicate Wars' cross-promotion with _Ghost In The Shell_ came in the form of videos running in the game-world – an incredible feature at the time. How did that come about?

It was, quite simply, good timing and a good fit. We featured *Ghost In The Shell*, they featured *Syndicate Wars* – it was just straightforward case of cross-promotion.

But that reminds me – I actually put in the video playback myself, with the game streaming it from the hard drive. Peter Molyneux took a build out to the press to show it off, and he told the press that you'd be able to put a DVD into your computer, and it will play on these video boards in the game. It was just the most insane thing to say – I was quite annoyed, it was a really cool feature having these video boards, and it didn't need this extra exaggeration. I was also kind of annoyed that journalists believed it – computers didn't even have DVD drives back then, that didn't come for another four or five years. The whole thing was just so nonsensical, but I would just describe it as another Peter crazy exaggeration.

Were there ever plans for a sequel?

We weren't thinking of a sequel, no, it was never really discussed. There was the odd prototype, playing with first-person perspective and so on, but it wasn't ever anything serious – especially when the sales came back, they weren't particularly encouraging.

With hindsight I can kind of see why – the first game's screenshots looked amazing for the time, it was one of the first games that was high resolution, that being 640x480, it was all hand-painted sprites… but with *Syndicate Wars* because it was 3D it ran at 320x240, with quite pixellated textures. It didn't quite shine in screenshots, you had to see it in motion to appreciate it. So it never really had the instant visual appeal, and the only real marketing we had at the time was screenshots – it was always a struggle to sell itself in that way.

I'M ALWAYS SURPRISED WE GOT TWO FACTIONS IN, IT WAS LIKE A WHOLE OTHER GAME ON TOP OF THE GAME

Were any elements cut from your original plans?

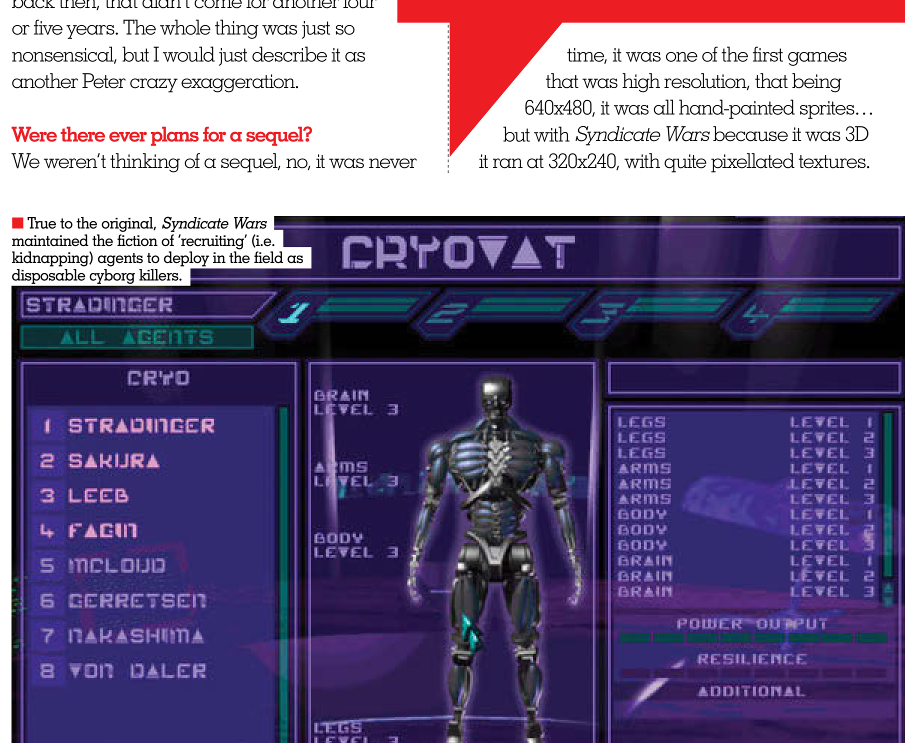
You were actually going to be able to play the game all the way through as the Punks, but that's something that was cut out. It was crazy enough we were doing the game with two factions, never mind three. I'm always surprised we got two factions in, it was like a whole other game on top of the game.

And is there anything about _Syndicate Wars_ you wish you could go back and change?

That would probably be a decision I made – a lot of people argued it, but I stood fast on it. In hindsight, I think it was a mistake. That was the camera zoom being limited by the range of the weapon you were holding. If you had a flamethrower it was zoomed in close, if you had a sniper rifle it zoomed out. To me that gave the weapons a more real world effect, but in hindsight – and replaying it last year – it made you feel trapped, it lost a lot of the visual appeal of the game. That's my biggest regret, along with the fact we didn't support higher resolutions – we just didn't see anything above 640x480 to be necessary, or even possible, at the time.

And finally, what's your favourite game you've ever worked on? (Including the likes of _Startopia_, _Theme Park_ and _GTA IV_)

It probably would be *Syndicate Wars*, as much about the time it was made as anything else. Everything was new, it was one of the most exciting times in games development, everyone was finding their feet and working out what made a good game, tech was advancing. Bullfrog had that indie studio heart to it, it was great to be at that world-leading game developer making such great games.



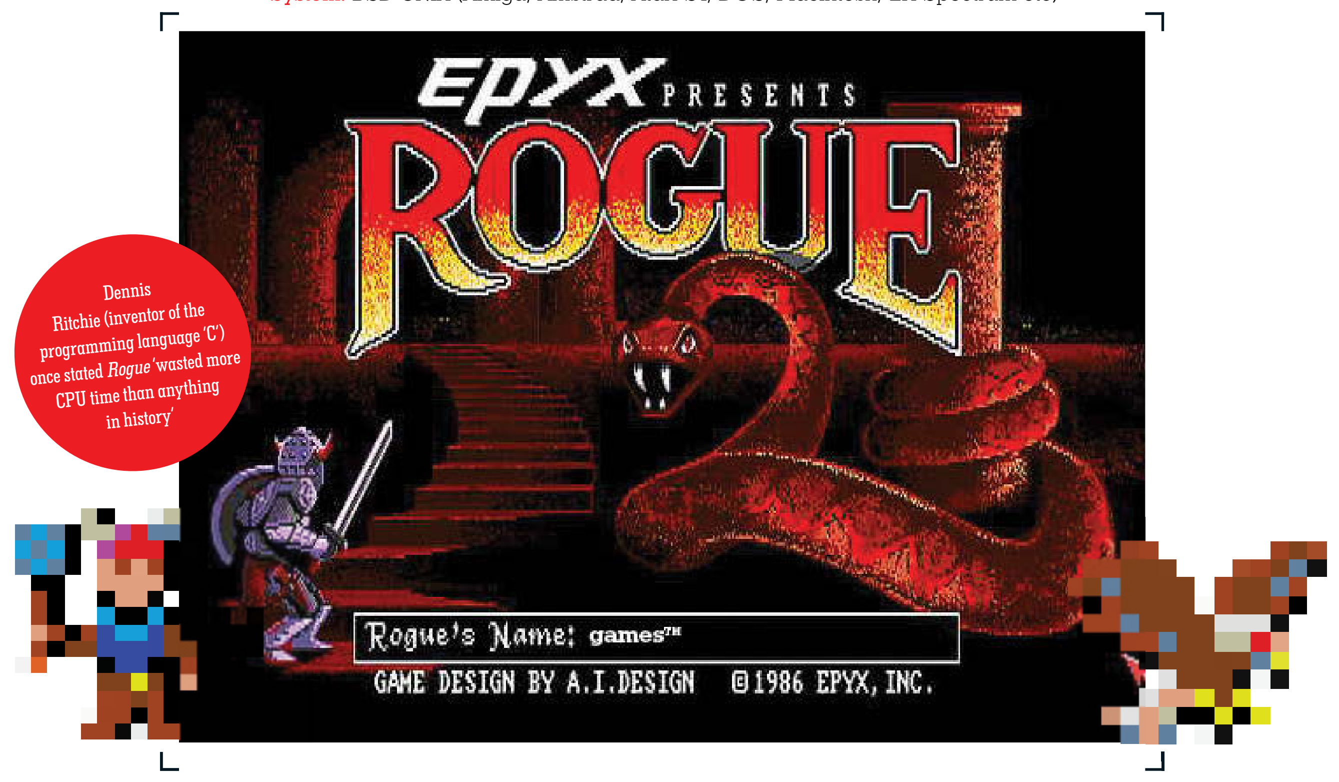
True to the original, *Syndicate Wars* maintained the fiction of 'recruiting' (i.e. kidnapping) agents to deploy in the field as disposable cyborg killers.



GAME CHANGERS

ROGUE

Released: 1980 **Publisher:** Epyx **Developers:** Michael Toy, Glenn Wichman
System: BSD UNIX (Amiga, Amstrad, Atari ST, DOS, Macintosh, ZX Spectrum etc)



Dennis Ritchie (inventor of the programming language 'C') once stated *Rogue* 'wasted more CPU time than anything in history'

Still actively played, ported and enhanced, Rogue has stood the test of time and has even leant its name to an entire genre. **games™** takes a comprehensive look at one of the most quietly influential games of all time…

ROGUE: EXPLORING THE Dungeons of Doom – to give the game its full name – is one of the precious few games that managed to achieve worldwide fame and recognition, despite originating on the UNIX platform… a base initially designed for science and industry rather than videogame coding. UNIX platforms lacked a dedicated audio/visual interface, and instead featured only character-set graphics, meaning bored programmers could only make games in ASCII or ANSI graphics.

Rogue's creators – Michael Toy and Glenn Wichman – had been involved in videogame development before, but had been limited to creating text-based adventures. Thanks to another programmer's development of a script called 'curses' – which translated the UNIX's character set into rudimentary graphics – the duo began to start applying their knowledge of role-playing games to a more visual medium.

Initially simple, the game the pair made was actually very knowing – the textual graphics related smartly to the function: you played as the '@' symbol because it denoted where you were at, and enemies were represented by 'z' (for zombie). These graphics routines – innovative as they were – weren't *Rogue*'s biggest feature, though. It was the dungeons, generated randomly as the player progressed, that would have the biggest impact.

The other games the pair had been making suffered from limited playability – once you've solved the basic story, what more was left to achieve? This new game still only had one goal, but the branching

THE ANATOMY OF ROGUE

ROGUE IS ONE OF PRECIOUS FEW GAMES THAT'S GIVEN ITS NAME TO A WHOLE GENRE – BUT WHAT GAVE THE GAME ITS SHAPE IN THE FIRST PLACE?



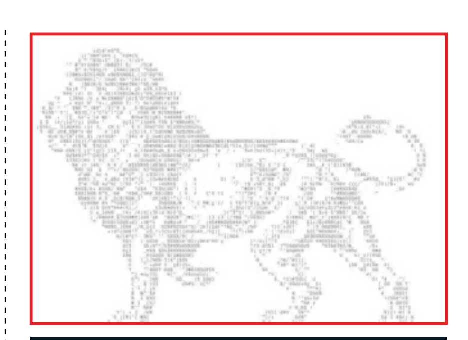
COLOSSAL CAVE ADVENTURE

★ The text game *Colossal Cave Adventure* influenced the idea for the dungeon-crawling aspects of *Rogue* with its maze-like structure that encouraged exploration.



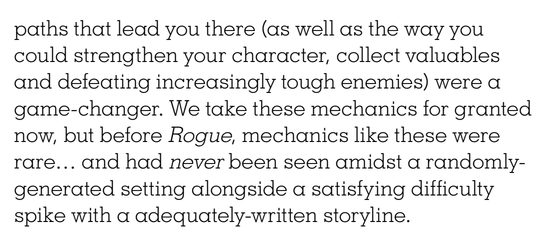
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

★ The original version of the game had the majority of its lore and monster characters modelled on D&D, but this was changed for legal reasons.



'CURSES'

★ It was Ken Arnold's 'curses' script that let *Rogue*'s developers use text icons to create in-game imagery that would be understandable to casual players.



paths that lead you there (as well as the way you could strengthen your character, collect valuables and defeating increasingly tough enemies) were a game-changer. We take these mechanics for granted now, but before *Rogue*, mechanics like these were rare… and had *never* been seen amidst a randomly-generated setting alongside a satisfying difficulty spike with a adequately-written storyline.

Rogue was challenging, too – because of how unpredictable it was, you'd basically play through a new game every time. You needed to stock yourself up with healing items, and be cautious about the enemies you encountered. Death meant the end of that particular adventure, and the next time you played, everything would be totally different. Games had done this before, certainly – *Beneath Apple Manor* (1978) being the most notable example – but *Rogue*'s unique approach to difficulty and death made it stand out, and ultimately, define the genre.

Rogue didn't achieve mass recognition until it was formally added to the BSD UNIX platform – after Toy's peers at Berkeley's University of California decided to include the game on the machines by default (like *Solitaire* on Windows). At the time, the BSD UNIX was the platform of choice for universities across the world – and as such the game achieved fantastic exposure to fledgling programmers.

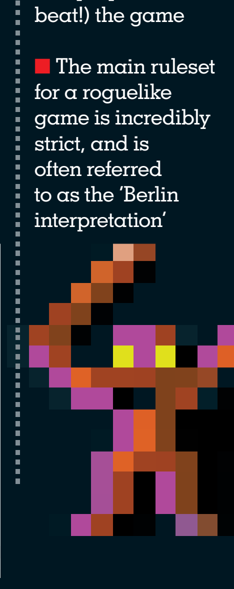
YOU NEEDED TO BE CAUTIOUS… DEATH MEANT THE END OF THAT PARTICULAR ADVENTURE

KEY FACTS

- *Rogue* started a 'purist' movement amid PC gamers – players that defended games without any audio/visual support

- Due to how developers could program UNIX machines, it wasn't uncommon for players to build 'Rog-O-Matic' software that could autoplay (and beat!) the game

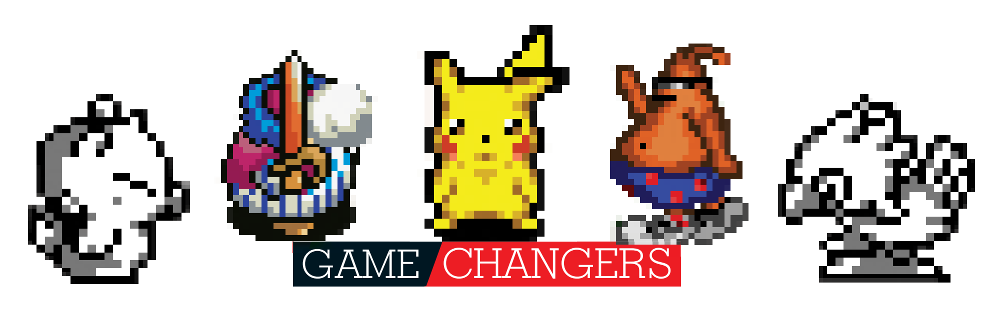
- The main ruleset for a roguelike game is incredibly strict, and is often referred to as the 'Berlin interpretation'



Since the code was not commercially available, these junior programmers would go on to re-make *Rogue* themselves, keeping the game alive on various platforms going forward in time. The game – difficult and addictive – achieved a level of notoriety, and this began to feed into the legend of the game. It may not have been the first game to use randomly generated elements within an RPG skin, but it was the first game of the type to really capture gamers' imaginations and attentions.

The game became the undisputed king of the college campus – everyone at University in the US was playing it at one time, according to Wichman himself – and this opened the floodgates for *Rogue*'s commercial success. Toy and another programmer (Jon Lane) ported the game over to the IBM PC in 1984 and enlisted the help of publisher Epyx to sell the game on other formats; including Apple Macintosh, Commodore Amiga, Atari ST and many more by 1988. Each version was ported differently and acquired new enhancements or mechanical variations en-route.

The unfortunate aspect to this origin story is that by the time Epyx got around to marketing and selling *Rogue*, there were already so many free versions of the game on the market, there seemed to be very little consumer interest in purchasing it officially. Between the freeware versions of the game and other developers that had taken advantage of Wichman and Toy's open-source code to make their own variations, *Rogue* failed abysmally on the market. Still, it wasn't all bad news: the game had been so impactful when it was released that many imitators had taken on its mechanics, and even though it wasn't commercially successful, *Rogue* got to live on in the etymology of gaming in a term we still use today.

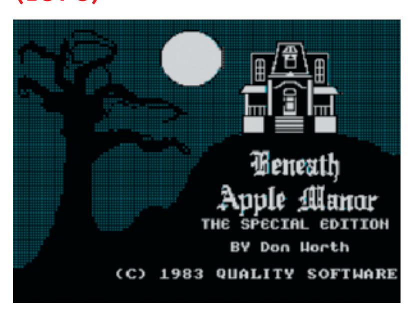


GAME CHANGERS

A CHRONOLOGY OF 12 NOTABLE ROGUELIKES

FROM 'PURE' EXAMPLES THAT HOLD TO THE BERLIN INTERPRETATION TO HYBRID FORMS OF THE GAME THAT DEVIATE FROM THE RULESET, HERE ARE SOME OF THE KEY GAMES IN THE HISTORY OF THE ROGUELIKE GENRE

BENEATH APPLE MANOR (1978)



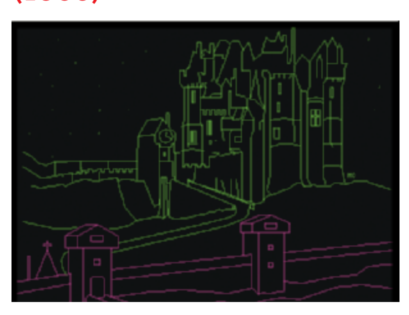
■ ONE OF THE earliest commercial Apple II games, it predates *Rogue* and even came with a primitive graphical display to accompany the text-based version. Its fantasy setting set the standard for randomly-generated games.

TELENGRAD (1982)



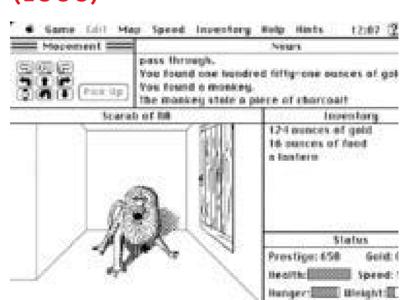
■ HIGHLY REGARDED AS one of the first professionally produced computer role-playing games, *Telengrad* riffed heavily on D&D but did so in a more interactive way. You played in real-time, but it *wasn't* randomly generated.

MORIA (1983)



■ BASED HEAVILY ON Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings*, this is the game that's often cited to have influenced Blizzard's *Diablo* series. It gets its name from its main quest: kill the Balrog deep in the mines of Moria. It's simple, but certainly effective.

SCARAB OF RA (1988)



■ A FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE played a bit like a point-and-click, this game was a turn-based roguelike that introduced a more adventure game setting to the genre. It was released for Macintosh and can still be played on Mac OS today!

TOEJAM & EARL (1991)



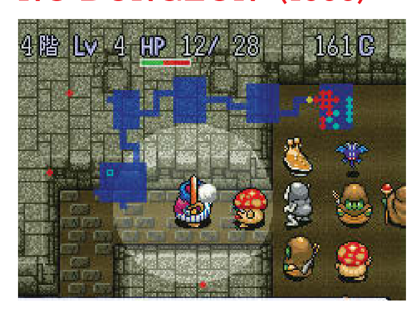
■ MORE 'ROGUE-LITE' THAN roguelike, this 2D, top-down game was made of randomly-generated floors that contained random items and – key to the genre – punishing permadeath. Its off-beat humour and art style were highlights.

UNREAL WORLD (1992)



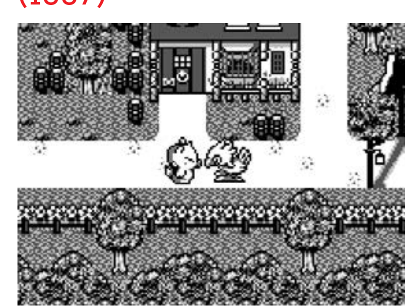
■ A GRAPHICAL ROGUELIKE adventure set in the far north during the late Iron Age. Interestingly, it was more concerned with survival elements than active exploration, and did a great job of showing you the ancient wilderness.

TORNEKO NO DAIBOKEN: FUSHIGI NO DUNGEON (1993)



■ THE FIRST GAME of the now-famous *Mystery Dungeon* series, this roguelike features Taloon – the merchant from developer Chunsoft's other flagship series, *Dragon Warrior*. The game spawned sequels in Japan and the West.

CHOCOBO'S MYSTERY DUNGEON (1997)



■ SQUARESOFT WANTED TO cash in on the roguelike craze by the late Nineties, and so began to transport its own iconic characters into the genre, resulting in everyone's favourite big yellow birdthings exploring dungeons for loot.

DARK CLOUD (2000)



■ THE DUNGEONS IN the game were powered and generated with a roguelike engine, but the game's 'purity' is often called into question thanks to the city-building portions of the game. Even so, the level design and exploration are pure.

POKÉMON MYSTERY DUNGEON: RED/BLUE RESCUE TEAM (2005)



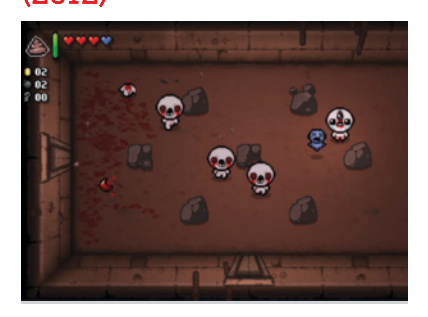
■ A PAIR OF games released using the very pure dungeon-crawling of Chunsoft's *Mystery Dungeon* franchise, but laced with that distinctive Pokémon aesthetic – arguably introducing the genre to younger players. Its story wasn't bad, either.

FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT (2012)

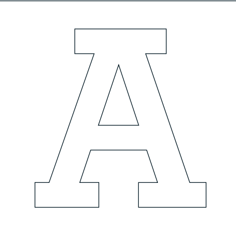
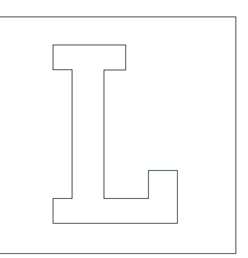
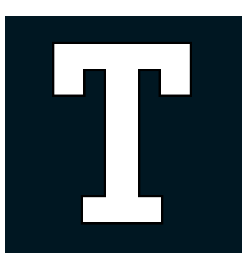


■ A 2D REAL-TIME strategy where you're tasked with moving from system to system whilst avoiding a trailing horde of enemies. You can put hundreds of hours into the game and still come nowhere close to completion, frustrating but a lot of fun.

THE BINDING OF ISAAC: REBIRTH (2012)



■ INSPIRED BY *THE Legend Of Zelda*, but with a very dark and surrealist twist, this game is known for its challenge – a lack of save points and some *very* punishing generation paths made it stand out from the crowd.

THE 

NUMSKULL JUMPERS

MANUFACTURER: **NUMSKULL** PRICE: **£34.99**

IT'S THAT TIME of year again and Numskull has followed up on its range of winter jumpers with a whole new selection of gaming-themed tops to keep you warm in the coldest of months. They are mostly a variation on the same sort of theme, but that doesn't stop there being some rather smart adaptations that take the best advantage of the various IP and gaming items being represented in jumper form. There are a few *Star Wars* ones to keep an eye out for too, which we would highly recommend, including a whole jumper covered in the helmet design of Boba Fett or the body of R2-D2. In the mean time, here's our verdict on the gaming-themed woolly wonders you can pick between. It's the only way self-respecting gamers should be dressed.

www.numskull.co.uk



STREET FIGHTER

Numskull has added three new *Street Fighter* designs to its collection after last year's excellent Ryu versus Ken number. Guile faces Cammy, Blanka takes on M. Bison and Sagat stares down Chun-Li. It's just a shame that the central star Hadouken theme has been lost in translation.



FALLOUT 4

Easily our favourite of the bunch, we could see Vault-Tec producing a jumper like this to keep its dwellers warm during the especially cold nights of the nuclear winter. A cheeky Vault Boy at the base of the design and some nuclear warning symbols on the sleeve round off a pretty amazing jumper.



CLASSIC SONIC

This feels like it's stepped right out of the early Nineties. *Sonic*'s iconic title screen image and the bright red backdrop make perfect companions. Special shout-out to the excellent use of gold rings around the bottom of this design, too. It's a small touch, but one we greatly appreciate.



ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE

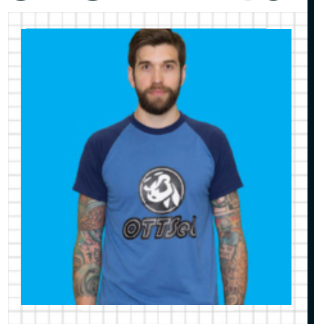
Combining a game about stabbing people in the neck with a hidden blade and the holiday season wouldn't have been our first move, but it works a treat. There's something about the iconic Tower Bridge and a snowy scene that instantly feels right. The classic *AC* logo looks pretty good, too.



ORIGINAL PLAYSTATION

We rather liked last year's PlayStation jumper, but this one is so much better. It's covered in smart little references to the classic DualShock controller, with D-pads and buttons all over it. The grey wool is a perfect match for the colour of the original console, too. It's a must-have for fans of the Sony console.

GAMING CLOTHING



OTTSEL

Insert Coin Clothing is bagging some top Sony licensing right now and its range of *Uncharted* wear stands out as particularly strong. Loving this nod to the swimwear brand in the game.

www.insertcoinclothing.com



HOG WILD

Inspired by Sullivan's plane, which got a starring role in *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, this shirt features the pin-up model design from the side of the sea plane as well as the colouring of the original craft.

www.insertcoinclothing.com



FEISAR

One of our favourite elements of *WipEout*, besides the insane speed and superb soundtrack was the excellent graphic design and the wonderful range of future brands its concocted. This is inspired by one of them.

www.insertcoinclothing.com

INTELLIVISION FLASHBACK CLASSIC GAME CONSOLE



SOLD BY: **FUNSTOCK** PRICE: **£49.99**

WITH ALL THE shiny triple-A releases you'll be enjoying in the coming months, it might be nice to wind down with some retro gaming, particularly if you can get some multiplayer going. With games like *Mattel's Basketball*, *Utopia* and *Baseball* to enjoy, this flashback machine for the IntelliVision comes with 60 games in total and two standard controllers so you can enjoy them all with a buddy. It's the best way to revisit some pretty fun little games for not a huge amount of money. Plus, the quality of these machines is very impressive.

www.funstock.co.uk

ATARI FLASHBACK 6 CLASSIC GAME CONSOLE

SOLD BY: **FUNSTOCK** PRICE: **£49.99**

PERHAPS A LITTLE more familiar to older gamers, this Atari console comes with a pretty impressive 100 built-in games and also features two arcade sticks so that you can enjoy some multiplayer gaming right out of the box. Arcade classics like *Pong* and *Space Invaders* are there to enjoy immediately, making it an ideal machine to pull out for friends and family to enjoy a little gaming nostalgia. It's also a pretty amazing history lesson for younger gamers to get involved with.

www.funstock.co.uk



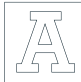
COLECOVISION FLASHBACK CLASSIC GAME CONSOLE

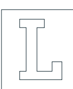


SOLD BY: **FUNSTOCK** PRICE: **£49.99**

RELEASED AFTER THE IntelliVision, but sporting a similar controller setup, this retro revival of the 1982 ColecoVision features 60 titles to play immediately and is also ready to go for multiplayer action. Games like *Choplifter*, *Jumpman Junior* and *Zaxxon* are sure to entertain. The compact design, as with the other Flashback machines here, is also something to be admired. It's compact enough to not take up too much room and carries enough of the original design to remain in theme with the retro content.

www.funstock.co.uk




RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER
THE OFFICIAL ART BOOK

PUBLISHER: **TITAN BOOKS**



GIVEN THE MORE intercontinental nature of Lara's latest adventure, we're looking forward to getting to see a lot more variety from this new collection of concept designs and renders for the Xbox One timed exclusive adventure. While the *Tomb Raider* art collection was pretty strong, its singular island setting didn't exactly allow for much variation in style or locale. But thanks to some Siberian rock climbing and desert-based tomb-hunting, this promises to be a much more engaging and enthralling trip through the early concept process of a game, not to mention all the new characters and enemies involved.

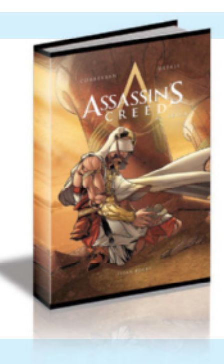
This 192-page opus chronicles the entire process of how the Crystal Dynamics team began to construct the sequel to its critically and commercially acclaimed reboot of the Croft canon. As well as art, sketches and 3D concept renders of major characters, outfits, weapons, vehicles and locations, you can read stories direct from the team responsible about how it all came about. If you're an Xbox One owner looking to get a little deeper into the *Tomb Raider* experience, this seems like pretty essential reading. PlayStation fans may want to pick it up just so they can muse over everything they'll get to enjoy later in 2016. Given the strength of the previous game's art collection we think this should be a particularly enjoyable new release. This team has some great artists and the insights should be revealing.



HALO: LAST LIGHT

In case simply reading the latest chapter in the *Halo* expanded universe wasn't enough incentive to pick up this new book, buying a physical copy of *Last Light* will also give you an unlock code for a special REQ pack in *Halo 5: Guardians*. Pretty sweet deal for those of you captivated by Warzone.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



ASSASSIN'S CREED – LEILA

The latest chapter in the ongoing *Assassin's Creed* graphic novel series sees us return to Egypt and the tale of El Cakr, wrapping up this particular saga. Where will the hunt for the Sceptre of Aset lead the ageing assassin and his descendants?

www.titanbooks.com



THE ART OF XCOM 2

With so many aliens and fighters to get into, *XCOM* has a rich world that proves to be pretty amazing fodder for concept artists to let rip and start designing masses of great work. This collection for *XCOM 2* is a perfect example of all of that. Due out in 2016, this book will be a nice accompaniment to the PC release.

www.titanbooks.com



Imagine Publishing Ltd
Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill,
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Magazine team
Editor **Jonathan Gordon**
☎ 01202 586213
Editor In Chief **Ryan King**
Senior Staff Writer **Dom Peppiatt**
Production Editor **Rebecca Richards**
Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**
Assistant Designer **Sophie Ward**
Photographer **James Sheppard**
Publishing Director **Aaron Asadi**
Head of Design **Ross Andrews**

Contributors
Luke Albigés, Adam Barnes, Ben Biggs, David Crookes, Ian Dransfield, Ross Hamilton, Steve Holmes, Matt Kamen, Graeme Mason, Emma Quinlan, Dominic Reseigh-Lincoln, John Robertson, Chet Roivas, Chris Scullion, Katy Sheen, Gavin Thomas, Nick Thorpe, Paul Walker-Emig, Josh West

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Advertising
Digital or printed media packs are available on request.
Head of Sales Hang Deretz ☎ 01202 586442
hang.deretz@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Account Manager Anthony Godsell ☎ 01202 586420
anthony.godsell@imagine-publishing.co.uk

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Head of International Licensing Cathy Blackman
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586401 licensing@imagine-publishing.co.uk

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Circulation
Head of Circulation Darren Pearce ☎ 01202 586200

Production
Production Director Jane Hawkins ☎ 01202 586200

Finance
Finance Director Marco Peroni

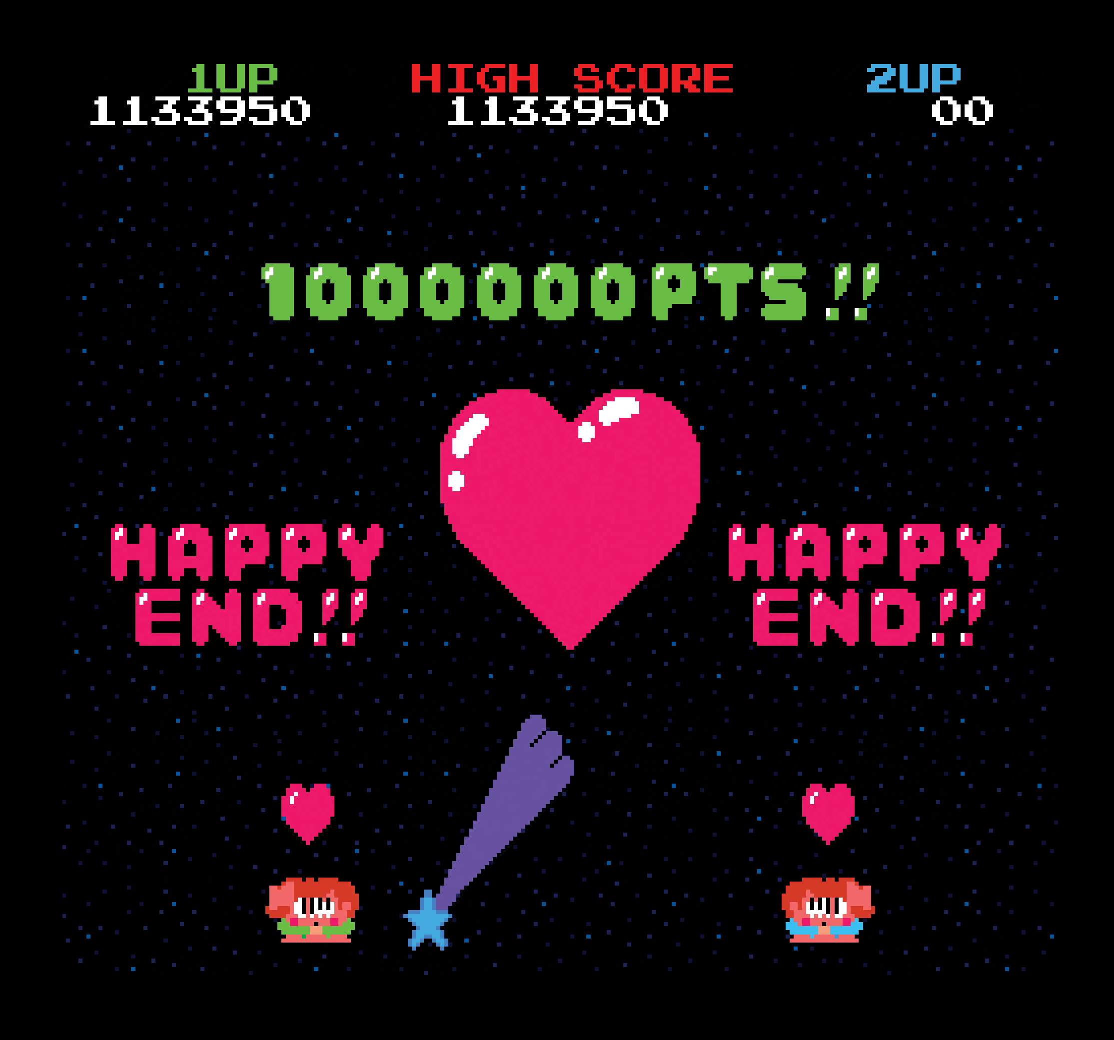
Founder
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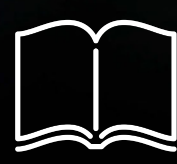
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